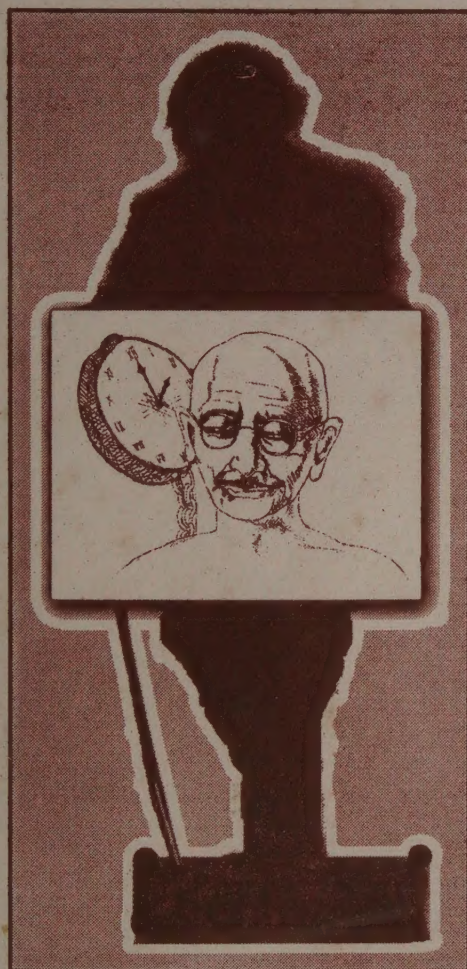


STATUE OF THE MAHATMA



K. G. MALLYA

I SAW BAPU

One day,
When I was counting money
I came across a note
A strange currency note
And when I carefully looked
An incredible scene
Was before me:
It was Bapu
Father of our Nation
Who was standing before me
With a bright smile.
Unbelieving,
For a while
I stood like a statue.
Then I saluted
And asked
"Bapu when you have
Hundreds of followers
And thousands of believers
Across the country
And all over the world
Why this rare honour
Bestowed on me?"
He smiled
More graciously
And said affectionately,
"Child!
I wanted to convey,
Something,
From the bottom of my heart
And I know you'll
Appreciate my views!
And please listen:
"Time has come to abandon
My three legendary monkeys:
'Evil, you hear not,
Evil, you see not,
And Evil you speak not.'
Because my ever smiling face is
Printed on your notes

[cont...cover Page 3]

STATUE OF THE MAHATMA

Novel
By
K. G. Mallya

2009

Published by
M/s. Deepa Publications,
Main Road,
KINNIGOLI—574150 (D.K.Dist)

STATUE OF THE MAHATMA

A Novel By K.G.Mallya

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First Edition: 2009

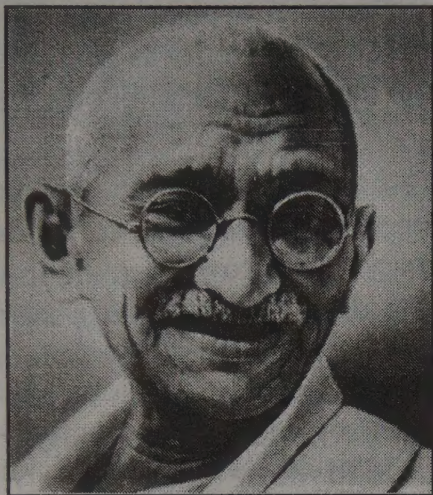
Price: Rs.10C/-

Cover Design: Mrs Nandini Kamath

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Yugapurusha Mudranalaya,
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MAHATMA GANDHI



FATHER OF OUR NATION
(140th Birthday Celebrations, 2009)

FOREWORD

When the values cherished by us for centuries get devalued and violence gets gloried, it would be difficult to believe that one of the greatest proponents of non-violence has lived on this earth. The invaluable achievements of Gandhiji in adopting non-violent means for leading the nation from alien rule to freedom may remain only in the pages of history. As the people of his generation are vanishing over the years, the innate strengths of his teachings may not be understood by the new generation. His concept of Sarvodaya and liberal thinking may appear to be of no relevance to the younger generation. Perhaps to remind the world that he is still remembered in India, one or other road or a new township in all the major cities are named after him.

It is rarely remembered that Gandhiji, the great apostle of peace, had invented the Sathyagraha as a potent weapon of non-violent struggle on September 11, 1906. It is an historical irony that the infamous fundamentalist and internationally despised terrorist, Osama Bin Laden has chosen the same day after 95 years to destroy the World Trade Centre in New York. That was the day, Gandhiji made his experiment in Sathyagraha in Johannesburg in South Africa to fight against the dreaded rule of Apartheid regime. (Gandhi, Father

of a Nation, by Catherine Clement, published by Thames and Hudson, London, 1996. See, Document, page 142). This day 9/11 is more likely to be remembered by posterity as a black day in the history of humanity, than as the day when Gandhiji invented a new weapon of peaceful struggle.

Shri. K G Mallya's book is a satire on the ignorance of the city fathers of an obscure town about the very existence of Gandhiji. This could be the story of any town in India in the not too distant future. When land was dug for constructing the new office building for the municipality, a statue of Gandhiji was found buried. Nobody was able to identify the statue on which Father of the Nation was sculptured, but the word Nation was missing. It turns out to be a big problem to decide as to whose father he was. A reward of Rs.5000/- was announced for recognizing the statue, yields poor response. If Gandhiji was awarded the Nobel Prize, perhaps, some bright students would have recognised him as Nobel Prize winner. Gandhiji did not get Nobel Prize and hence students do not know about him. Probably, Gandhiji himself would not have accepted the prize, as Mr. Nobel has instituted this prize out of the huge wealth he has amassed by selling ammunitions.

City Fathers blissfully ignorant about Gandhiji's greatness, readily consent to change the name of Gandhi Maidan. Machinations of a shrewd one among them attempting behind the scene to name the maidan after his father are not far from reality. Honouring some of those, who have never participated in the freedom movement, as freedom fighters, is not uncommon now. And the college principal blaming the system to cover up his ignorance is not an imaginary character. No wonder, Gandhian thoughts continue to remain as an optional subject in post-graduate studies of Political Science in many of our universities.

In seeking to unravel the value system in the current politico-social system, Mallya's efforts are very successful. It is effortlessly caricatured, realistically and sincerely conveyed. Parody here is not an exaggeration nor is it totally imaginary.

Mangalore,
9th July 2009

Dr. N. K. Thingalaya,
Chairman & Managing Director (1995-1997)
Syndicate Bank, H.O.Manipal

APPRECIATION

When the author of this book, Shri K.G.Mallya approached me with a request to write a few lines on his book, "Statue of the Mahatma" I was really overjoyed for two reasons. Firstly because he is a close friend of mine besides the Editor of All India Saraswat Cultural Organisation (AISCO) of which I am the President Emeritus and Pikale Foundation of which I am the Chairman. He has edited quite a few books of both these organisations in addition to his being the Editor of Samyukta Saraswat Quarterly Bulletin of the AISCO even now.

The second reason, the main one, is that the book is devoted to Mahatma Gandhi, Father of our Nation whose 140th Birth Day is going to be celebrated this year. I am a great admirer and fan of Gandhiji since my school days. Gandhiji became a legend during his lifetime itself and even though it is more than six decades now we have not seen a leader of that stature who could lead the masses effectively towards the goal with a single-minded devotion and dedication.

I vividly remember those days of supreme sacrifice by the people under the leadership of Gandhiji with one point programme of attaining independence and it was firmly believed that once the independence was attained we should be able to build India of our dreams. The path chosen by Gandhiji was a simple one called 'Satyagraha' consisting only of Non-violence, Truth and Love. We attained independence following this path but did we build India of our dreams?

Gandhiji visited Kumta when I was a student and after beholding him with a thrill, I have not forgotten him till today. I was so attracted by his personality that he has secured a firm place in my mind and heart, forever. I was associated in my own humble way in the countrywide Salt Satyagraha called for by Gandhiji and also organised in Uttara Kannada District as a part of that, under the leadership of Dr.B.M.Pai known as the Mahatama Gandhi of Uttara Kannada, along with Shri Hari Pai and also my uncle Shri Dinakara Desai. To keep Gandhiji's memory always alive, in my native village Shirigunji, Uttara Kannada, which was devoid of any school, I built a primary school and named it as Mahatma Gandhi Primary School.

With this background, I went through this book, "Statue of the Mahatma," that portrays the present day political thinking and approach in our country. Local sentiments yes, but not at the cost of national outlook and values. According to me, this is the central message of this book.

I congratulate Shri Mallya on bringing out this very valuable book during the 140th year of Mahatma Gandhi, the beloved Father of our Nation.

Margao, Goa
9th July 2009

S. V. Pikale,
Senior Advocate,
Supreme Court of India, New Delhi

ABOUT THIS BOOK

This is a story of a Municipality. But this does not refer to any Municipality in particular.

A Municipality is a good specimen of our system of self-rule. The elected representatives are supposed to take decisions for the welfare of the town. In regular meetings they have to discuss and debate various problems confronting the welfare of the town and solutions are to be collectively sought. An effective Municipality can do a lot for the welfare of people. But, it seldom happens that way. Councillors with different background, experience and ideologies do make or mar the meetings wasting a lot of time and public money. Often personal ambitions and aspirations play a dominant role in the decision making process.

In this story—purely a fiction—the young Mayor, a Non-Resident Indian in his thirties, born, brought up and educated in the United States with a limited knowledge of India is striving hard to carry out reforms. But how far he is successful?

Though this is the story of a Municipality, it is not the story of the Municipality alone as it is indirectly depicting various virtues and values, the Father of our Nation stood for.

The Mahatma is not forgotten in our country and he will never be forgotten. But we must admit that he is receding into oblivion on account of local sentiments, local aspirations, local politics and local political parties. Therefore it is the bounden duty of every Indian to keep his memory fresh by following at least some of his ideals in every day public life, especially if our Nation has to thrive and succeed as a great nation to lead others by example.

The novel was first published as a serial from 27 instalments in the Bhavans' Journal of Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mumbai way back in 1997-98 and was soon rendered in Hindi and Kannada Languages. The Kannada version translated by Shri L.Narasimhiah, Retd. Head Master, Tumkur, bagged the state level award as the Best Book on Mahatma for the year 2000. Later, it was rendered into a Kannada Drama now being staged in Mysore and Bangalore. However, after 14 years this original work is now coming out in the form of a book though written between 2nd Oct 1995 to 25th Oct 1995 when I was serving for Syndicate Bank as the Zonal Head in Ahmedabad (Gandhiji's work place for some years on the banks of the River Sabarmati), during the last lap of my banking career.

Kinnigoli,

9th July 2009

K. G. Mallya

STATUE OF THE MAHATMA

1. THE FIRST MEETING

After assuming the office of the Mayor, it was his first meeting and in the very first meeting itself the young Mayor made the following announcement:

"I have great pleasure in bringing to the notice of the Honourable members of our Municipality that the Standing Committee in its meeting held yesterday decided to move out of this old and congested building to a new one to be constructed on the vacant land called Gandhi Maidan on the outskirts of this town. If this august house unanimously approves of the Standing Committee's decision then we can approach the State Government for the necessary permission to go ahead. Our building section has already prepared a wonderful plan. The new premises will be spacious, elegant and the most magnificent in the town with ample space adequate for another one hundred years."

Hearing, the City Fathers happily clapped their hands in applause.

The Mayor smiled jubilantly and asked enthusiastically, "Any questions, before we take on record that the resolution to construct the new building is unanimously passed?"

"Yes, Mr. Mayor, I have one question," the Senior-most councillor stood up. Every body looked up at him questioningly. He cleared his throat dramatically and asked in a loud tone authoritatively. "Mr. Mayor, you said it is Gandhi Maidan. Since my childhood, I am frequent visitor to that elevated place called Gandhi Maidan. Can anyone in this august house tell us who is this Gandhi and why the ground is called Gandhi Maidan?"

"Any answer to this question?" The Mayor enquired and everyone promptly answered, "I do not know who this Gandhi is and why and how the place is called Gandhi Maidan."

The Mayor said, "Even I do not know, either. We can ask some elderly persons living in the locality. Apart from this any other question?"

"But my question remains unanswered," the Senior complained. "Before we proceed, it is better we know it." He insisted, to everybody's amazement. The Mayor was taken aback. Perturbed he requested, "The honourable Senior member must not insist on the answer just now as our main concern is new building and not the name of a locality. We shall however gather this information later. In the meantime we shall not keep the issue of constructing the new building pending, which is more important than the genesis of the name of an open land. Let us not side track the main issue..."

"Mayor sir, you are right!" a voice came from the last bench. "Then can I say that this august body has approved the decision of the Standing Committee to shift?" The Mayor asked eagerly. "Of course, subject to my getting the clarification." The Senior again demanded.

"That should not be the issue," the Backbencher who had earlier supported the Mayor shouted back. "We agree! We agree!" All joined together and raised their hands in support.

The Mayor's face beamed with happiness. He smiled and declared: "One month from now on Vijay Dashami Day, if all goes well, we will have 'Bhoomi Poojan' Ceremony on the site."

"I agree," the Senior, still adamant said: "But before that please collect the information about the name of the place."

The young Mayor smiled, rather mischievously and announced: "I can understand the feelings and sentiments of our Honourable Senior. Let us not take his words as throwing a spanner in the moving wheel. I definitely respect his wishes and now and here announce the constitution of a committee of three persons to go into the details of how the place acquired the name 'Gandhi Maidan.' The Honourable Senior will be the Chairman of that Committee and the other two will be the members to assist him. I hope our Honourable Members will approve the constitution of this special committee."

"Yes," every one raised his hand in approval and then loudly conveyed, "Congrats!" The Senior stood up, joined palms, bowed his head and said, "With all humility I accept the honour conferred and also the confidence placed on me by this august body."

"You will have our fullest support," the Mayor said with an air of relief: "The committee can make use of the official jeep. All the

expenses will be borne by the Municipality. Trips by air to any part of the country are permitted and if required, with the permission of the Competent Authority, travel abroad to collect information can also be organized. Let us find out once for all who is Gandhi and why the place is called Gandhi Maidan.”

“Great!” All the councillors applauded: “That should be the spirit of democracy. Even a dissenting voice has a say. Really great!”

2. PROPOSAL TO RENAME

As scheduled a special meeting took place on the day previous to Vijay Dashami the concluding day of the festival of Dasara. The Mayor was in chair and with the wooden hammer symbolising the authority he gently tapped the table and called the meeting to order. The first item on the agenda was the Bhoomi Poojan or the Pooja to the Mother Earth seeking her benediction before the work of construction officially commenced. The Building Committee Chairman, the Mayor himself informed the city fathers that the programme would start sharp at nine in the morning, the most auspicious hour of the day. He declared that the State Government was kind enough in granting the requisite clearance for the building project within a record time of three days. He also informed the house that as a token of gratitude and also to ensure support, he had invited the Chief Minister himself to offer the pooja to the Mother Earth for which he had readily consented. Then as a matter of protocol he had also invited to be the Guest of Honour, the Minister for Local-bodies who had also given his consent. Hearing everybody conveyed appreciation by way clapping of hands.

The Mayor further explained that a colourful ‘shamiana’ was going to be erected so that the invitees could comfortably sit down and hear the speeches, besides watching the pooja. Again all the councillors nodded their head in approval.

“After the Pooja,” the Mayor enthusiastically continued, “all the councillors will come back here. The Chief Minister and the Minister would like to meet our Honourable Members, of course, over dinner.” “Good!” was the reaction of the councillors full of appreciation.

"I request all our Honourable Members to be at the site, that is Gandhi Maidan sharp at quarter to nine to receive the Chief Minister and the Minister," the Mayor continued to state: "I have already arranged for thirty garlands of equal size—all of red roses—so that all can garland one by one. The Municipality will bear the expenses. I request not to bring any personal garlands. On behalf of the Municipality to the Chief Minister, I shall offer the garland first—a slightly longer one with more flowers and a similar one to the Minister and also bouquets to both of them. I hope there will not be any objection."

"No! No! Mayor has every right to do this!" Prompt was the reaction from all the City Fathers in a chorus.

"Then, if this House sanctions a modest budget, we will present a silver 'Gitopadesh' depicting Lord Krishna preaching Gita to Arjun—a bigger one to the Chief Minister and a smaller one to the Minister."

"As Mayor you have every right to do these things in the best interest of the town and the citizens." Announced the Senior and agreeing with this statement, all the councillors nodded their head in assent.

"The battle is won!" thought the Mayor happily: "With this the Chief Minister and the Minister will be pleased with our hospitality." As he was thinking like this suddenly from the last bench came the familiar voice: "Mayor sir, last meeting you had constituted a committee that was to submit the report within a month's time. May we know the progress?"

The Mayor looked up at the Senior enquiringly who at once stood up and declared, "Should we discuss this today?"

"Our Honourable Member can tell us in a nutshell what has happened," the Mayor permitted. "Well," the chairman of the committee bowed his head for a while, pondered and then slowly said, "The exercise proved to be a futile one!" "Why futile? Can you not explain it in detail?" The Backbencher in his normal style demanded. "None in the town knows who this great Gandhi is and why the Maidan is named after him. During our study we enquired with every soul we came across." He confessed.

"Then, how much money was spent on this futile exercise?" The Backbencher asked in a harsh tone. "I will submit the bills. It is

not more than Rs.10,000/-" The Senior told curtly. "Have you travelled by air to other cities?" The Backbencher asked a searching question.

"No! The committee felt that it would serve no purpose. When the local people themselves do not know a thing, how can we expect outsiders to tell us?" He looked irritated at the question. "Then will you not go abroad to get to know?" The Backbencher sarcastically asked.

"I have already told it will not serve any purpose." The Senior raised his voice. "O.K. should we not know then why the place is called Gandhi Maidan?" He stuck to his gun.

It looked as if a verbal duel was going on and before it could go out of control, the Mayor thought it fit to intervene. He stood up majestically holding the hammer in his hand as a mark of authority and declared, "Friends, we will not discuss further. The committee has already submitted the report that none in the town knows the head and tail of the story of either Gandhi or how the place came to be known after him. Therefore the committee has requested for its dissolution. If the House so desires, I want to suggest something else!" He paused for a while. "The Mayor has every right to say!" The Senior declared.

"Yes! Yes!" All others also said loudly in a chorus.

"Mayor, sir! Please go ahead!" The Backbencher gave the green signal.

The Mayor smiled and declared, "Now that none in the town knows either Gandhi or the background of the name Gandhi Maidan which it appears is buried in the dim past, it is better we rename as Municipal Maidan."

"What is the great attraction in that name?" The Backbencher loudly reacted. "Even otherwise it is Municipal Maidan as the Municipality owns it. It is better we name it after some celebrity or some great personality."

"I agree!" The Senior seizing the opportunity said, "If this house does not mistake me, I have a humble suggestion to make." "Please go ahead!" The Mayor permitted.

"I will not be selfish in making this suggestion," the Senior told

apologetically, "please bear with me if I make some foolish statements."

"We function here democratically," the Mayor reassured: "Please go ahead!"

"Well, it is simple," He opened up his mind: "I have been serving this Municipality as a councillor for the last fifteen years with dedication and devotion. My father was a social worker in this town. I suggest..."

"What do you want to suggest?" The Backbencher hurriedly interrupted sensing something unusual: "You want the Maidan to be named after your father. Don't you? But just now where is the need to change the name? Let tomorrow's programme be over. We shall sit leisurely one day and discuss."

"That is a good suggestion." The Mayor appreciated wholeheartedly: "We shall concentrate on tomorrow's programme and make it a success. In the meantime all our Honourable Members can also think of renaming the Maidan especially after the name of the father of the Honourable Senior. After all as the saying goes, "Known devil is better than the unknown angel." At that the Senior suddenly got up irritated and said, "I object to your saying so. Mr. Mayor, did you call my father the known devil and that Gandhi an unknown angel? I take serious exception to your statement." For that the Backbencher's reaction was very sharp. "Who told you that your father was a devil? The Mayor sir quoted only a well-known saying!"

"Whatever be the thing, I object vehemently!" The Senior looked offended.

"It is not an unparliamentary word!" the Mayor defended himself.

"Parliamentary or unparliamentary, I will not care. As a mark of protest I will not participate in to-morrow's programme." With these words he staged a walk out to everybody's astonishment!

3. POOJA TO MOTHER EARTH

The next day,

The sun rose early on the Gandhi Maidan that was wearing a very colourful and festive look. A huge 'shamiana' had come up decorated tastefully with flowers, festoons, balloons and mango twigs. From the loudspeakers were coming out the melodious notes of recorded 'shehnai' and the whole town turned up at the Maidan to witness the Bhoomi Poojan at the hands of the Chief Minister of the state; that, too, at the instance and invitation of the Mayor, who happened to be the youngest of all the Mayors the Municipality had ever seen for the last one hundred years. He was not only young but also resourceful and energetic and given the proper opportunities and encouragement, he could be groomed for any position, this was what the citizens of that town thought whenever they had a chance to meet him, hear him or speak to him. Well, in the 'shamiana' was erected a high dais for the important guests and in front of the dais were neatly arranged rows of chairs for the invitees. A few yards away, outside the 'shamiana,' was the spot marked for the pooja of the Mother Earth. Two priests in saffron, one Senior and the other junior, had already arrived and had drawn in chalk powder a circle of the size of a bullock cart wheel in which they had drawn two triangles one over the other, one pointing down while the other pointing up to give the shape of a star with six small triangles upon the hexagon. These smaller triangles were filled with chalk powder of different colours like blue, yellow, green, crimson, red and purple. At the centre was placed a decorated copper pot with a coconut covering its mount. A traditional lamp kept near the pot was burning gently and not far away was kept the new ceremonial pickaxe duly decorated with flowers and silk ribbon. The priests were thus ready with everything, waiting only for the command to commence the pooja. As requested by the Mayor, except the Senior, everyone was present. They had already lined up near the entrance to receive the invitees and guests.

It was at nine o'clock that the Chief Minister was to arrive at the venue without any formality of someone going up to the capital for escorting him. The Chief Minister was a strict disciplinarian. He was known for keeping up the time except on a very few rare

occasions for no fault of his. Therefore, the Mayor was confident that he would arrive on time. However, as minute after minute ticked by after nine o'clock and as the Chief Minister was not in sight, the Mayor became anxious.

It was nine-thirty and the shamiana was already packed with invitees. The 'shehnai' having completed its first round of music started a replay. As the guests of honour were not in sight people started yawning and the priests started looking at their wristwatch, as if they would soon miss the most auspicious moment for offering the pooja. Craning their neck, the Mayor and his team kept on watching the way up to Gandhi Maidan.

"The Chief Minister and the Minister must have been held up somewhere," the Mayor told a councillor standing next to him. "Yes sir," he promptly replied. "I too feel so. Otherwise, they should have been here by this time."

"What might have happened?" the Mayor helplessly enquired. "Anything! From the break-down of the vehicles to the cancellation of the visit itself. The State Capital is three hours drive from here. Even if they were to start at six-thirty in the morning they should have been here by now." One of the councillors gave his opinion.

By then to their view came a cyclist speeding up towards the shamiana. The Mayor looked fixedly as the cyclist seemed to be in a great hurry to reach the destination. As he draw nearer and nearer he slowed down and, spotting the Mayor near the entrance, he got down, saluted respectfully and handed over an envelope. The Mayor was curious. He opened it hurriedly and it was a note from the Senior. It read, "Mr. Mayor, just now I received a telephone call from the Minister of Local bodies from the State Capital. He said the Chief Minister and he both were unable to attend our function as they were expecting some emergency telephone from New Delhi. He has asked me to convey the CM's and his own good wishes for the success of our Municipality."

The Mayor bit his lips and asked, "Where is your master?" "Sorry, sir," the messenger joined his palms and apologetically said, "He has a severe headache and so he is taking rest." The Mayor laughed. "On your way back pay a visit to the Municipal Dispensary, collect some medicines for the headache and pass on to your master. Tell

him that I have sent!" "Yes, master," Bowing his head he left the place at the same speed at which he had arrived. The Mayor hurriedly conferred with the councillors. It was decided that the Mayor, the first citizen of the town, should offer the pooja in the place of the Chief Minister and that he should address the gathering to convey the future plans of the Municipality had. Instead of official dinner, all of them would partake food together and the gifts already bought would be kept safe in the Mayor's chamber for use at the time of inauguration of the building. With these changes they thought of going ahead with the programme by making an immediate announcement over the microphone for the information of the audience. Accordingly, the announcement was made and the invitees were requested to remain seated while the pooja was offered.

The pooja began with the priests chanting mantras invoking Mother Earth. The Mayor was asked to sit down on a wooden board kept in front of the colourful circle on the ground. Obediently following the command of the priests, the Mayor devoutly sat down and joined his palms. The elderly priest made a big tilak of kumkum on his forehead symbolising an auspicious beginning. With the chant of mantras he asked the Mayor to sprinkle water round the circle and to place a garland on the decorated pot with the coconut atop. After placing the garland the young Mayor asked, "What does this pot with coconut symbolise?" The priests stopped chanting mantras and respectfully looked at him. The elderly priest explained: "It is called a 'Kalasha' that symbolises the universe in full form consisting of all the deities, planets, river, oceans and the scriptures. We are going to worship Mother Earth as a part and parcel of the universe."

"Then can you permit me to make a small deviation," when the Mayor enquired like this, the elderly priest looked puzzled but dared not speak a word. "All that I wanted was this much: We have brought thirty garlands to offer to the Chief Minister. Now that he is not coming the garlands will go waste. Therefore, how about each one of the councillors offering a garland to Mother Earth, now that I have offered one?" "That is not a bad idea," the elderly priest hesitatingly said. But they have to remove their footwear and then only they can garland. One must be barefooted as a mark of respect and devotion."

“Mohammedans and Christians, can they also offer?” the Mayor had a doubt. The priest asked wondering, “Why? Do they not believe even in Mother Earth?” The elderly priest looked fixedly at the Mayor with his eyes wide open. “Oh, no! Not that.” The Mayor clarified, “I thought our priests, who are normally orthodox, may not permit anyone to go near the place of worship.” The elderly priest, very secular and pragmatic addressed, “Mayor sir, God is like the Municipality. He belongs to all the citizens of all the faiths on this earth. He is not the private property of anybody. There is a beautiful mantra in Atharva Veda that clearly pronounces that the Earth is the home of people who have various religious faiths. Let the councillors come one by one and garland Mother Earth who sustains mankind irrespective of caste, creed or community.”

The Mayor was happy and so were the councillors. The Backbencher who offered the garland at the end had this to declare: “Mother Earth, how kind you are to give us food to eat, water to drink and space to build houses to work and take rest! Mother, we are exploiting you indiscriminately; yet you bear everything patiently. Oh, Mother, our dear Mother, thou art really great! Very great!” Then before the decorated pot he prostrated to everybody’s surprise. After getting up, he exclaimed: “It is good that the Chief Minister did not come. Otherwise none of us would have got this rare opportunity of garlanding and beseeching the Mother’s Grace!” He then reverentially touched the feet of the priests and sought blessings.

The elderly priest then waved camphor to the ‘kalasha’ and requested the Mayor to stand up. Handing over a small pot of milk he asked him to pour all a stretch just in front of him. After the milk was poured as directed, the elderly priest picked up the decorated pickaxe. Chanting loudly a few hymns he gave it to the Mayor with a request to dig symbolically three times at the exact spot where the milk had been poured. The Mayor took the pickaxe and enquired, “Should I simply make the pickaxe touch the ground gently or do you want me to hit hard?”

“Well,” the priest smiled, “You can do either ways because as soon as you hit the ground thrice, the religious ceremony will be over. Normally immediately thereafter the construction work will commence. I do not know what are the arrangements here.”

"We are starting the work just now," the Mayor smiled and got ready to hit the ground with the pickaxe. "Excuse me, sir!" A photographer standing close by came forward with a request, "I want to take a snap!" "Go ahead!" the Mayor permitted. There was a flash followed by a clicking sound, "Thank you!" The photographer saluted and ran away. The Mayor hit hard once, twice and as he hit hard for the third time, suddenly, there came a sound, as if it had struck some metallic object. Everybody felt that the pickaxe must have definitely hit a treasure-trove! The Mayor called out the name of the Municipal Engineer who at once appeared on the scene. The Mayor whispered something in his ear and handed over the pickaxe to him. The Engineer called his men and asked them to be ready. Then the remaining part of the ceremony was hurriedly rushed through. Thereafter the Mayor and his Senior colleagues occupied their seats on the dais.

The Mayor tendered an apology for the delay in starting the programme and informed the audience of the inability of the Chief Minister and also the Minister to attend the programme in view of some other pressing engagements. He then informed that the place was going to have a grand edifice for the Municipality that would act as a crest jewel to that developing town. He thanked everyone. Thereafter soft drinks were served. At the end of the programme, the Backbencher who always preferred to say the last word proposed a hearty vote of thanks.

4. STATUE OF A SAINT

Although the Chief Minister and the Minister were not able to attend the programme, the citizens of the town never felt their absence.

Though the Mayor was busy throughout the day, the sound of the ceremonial pickaxe hitting some metallic object kept on ringing in his ears. In the evening, when the council had met for reviewing the day's programme, the Mayor requested the Honourable Members to assemble again in the Gandhi Maidan the next day on the same spot where the pooja was offered. "Mayor sir, may we know the reason?" the Backbencher eagerly enquired.

"Well, to-day when I hit the ground with the pickaxe for the third time as a part of the ceremony, I heard some metallic sound indicating that there is something, something beneath the ground. May be a treasure-trove. Tomorrow we want to dig and see in everybody's presence, what it is."

"Really?" The councillors were surprised and in the next instant they asked, "Mr. Mayor, tell us who is keeping a watch over the spot?"

"I have already instructed the Municipal Engineer to keep a strict vigil overnight. He is going to be there on the spot with his band of dedicated workers." The Mayor explained: "I do not think there is any cause for anxiety. Tomorrow morning they will excavate in our presence. Let us see whether Mother Earth has blessed our town."

With these words the Mayor called it a day.

The next day,

All the councillors gathered in the same shamiana and interestingly the Senior was also present. The Mayor walked up to him and as though nothing had happened, greeted: "Hello sir, how are you this morning?"

"Fine, thank you!" He acknowledged, looking elsewhere.

"How is your headache?" The Mayor deliberately enquired. "Yesterday your messenger reported that you were unable to attend the programme on account of a severe headache."

"....." Not willing to speak, the Senior did not reply. Noticing this the Mayor at once changed the topic. "Let us see what awaits us in the belly of this Gandhi Maidan." He then went to the spot where the Engineer was waiting for the Mayor's command to commence the work.

The Mayor raised his hand and ordered: "Go ahead. We are waiting in the shamiana."

At once a band of twenty labourers started digging gently with the pickaxes and spades. Instead of digging directly at the spot where the Mayor had hit the previous day, leaving that spot intact, they dug in a wider area as if they were digging a well.

It was midday when the Engineer loudly called out: "Mayor sir and Councillor sirs, please rush immediately. Something unusual is visible."

Hearing, all of them rushed to the spot. The labourers were still in the pit with a depth of about eight feet and to the walls of the pit was kept reclining a life-size statue!

"Only this statue?" The Mayor enquired. "No treasure?"

The Engineer smiled: "Let them bring it up, sir. We shall clean and find out whether it is a statue or a treasure-trove in the shape of a statue."

"Should we dig deeper?" The labourers sought further instructions.

"That will do for the present." The Engineer instructed, "Still to make sure that there is nothing else, try your pickaxes and see whether there is solid rock or only the loose soil." They started digging again. After a while they reported. "Master only hard rock. No metallic sound."

"Then stop the work." The Engineer instructed. "We shall bring the statue up. Let us find out what the statue is made of, granite or metal."

Someone gently knocked at the statue with the wooden handle of his pickaxe. A metallic sound came. "Master, it is bronze!" The labourer announced.

"Bronze?" Everyone exclaimed. "Whose statue could this be? God, Goddess or a human being?"

The statue was very heavy. But the labourers brought it up making use of strong ropes.

The Engineer with his handkerchief blew away the dust covering the face of the statue and then asked his men to keep it straight. Obeying, at once they made the statue stand majestically on the ground. Once it stood, the Mayor surveyed from top to toe. It was a statue of an old man. Tall with baldhead and slim hands and legs. In his right hand was a staff and from the left hand side of the lion cloth he was wearing over his knees, was hanging a timepiece. He had covered his shoulders and chest with a shawl. Wearing spectacles, he was smiling graciously...

"Can anyone here tell whose statue this is?" The Mayor loudly asked. But none was able to identify.

The Engineer came forward and went round examining minutely

every inch of the statue standing on a pedestal that was slightly damaged. While examining, suddenly to his view came an inscription on the pedestal covered with dust. He asked a labourer to bring a wet cloth. When he wiped the dust with the cloth the inscription became visible and now he could recognise the language, which happened to be English. Sending out joyous shouts he announced: "Mayor sir, it is English. Would you like me to read out?"

"Yes!" Permitted the Mayor: "Please read out!"

He read out: "Mahatma Gandhi, Father of..." He paused for a while "Father of? What next?" The Backbencher enquired.

The Engineer declared that he was unable to read the word next to "Father of..." as it was in the damaged portion of the pedestal.

"Father of..." The Mayor asked curiously: "Who could be his son or sons or daughter or daughters?"

"That is beyond our comprehension!" The Senior reacted: "Now let our Engineer try to read other words if they are legible."

The Engineer sat in front of the statue. Bowing his head down he minutely examined and said, "Mayor sir, some of the words inscribed are beyond recognition. By putting together the broken words, I can reconstruct the whole inscription as follows:

"Mahatma Gandhi, Father of... We must win the war against illiteracy, poverty and disease. But before that must win political freedom. Truth and Non-violence and Love - these are the only three ways to achieve our goals." Hearing the words that sounded like a sermon the councillors and the Mayor thought over and over again and without knowing the background they stood speechless for a while. However, without further loss of time asked the Mayor: "Can anyone, brushing away the dust from the brain, tell me who stood for "Truth, Nonviolence and Love?" The young Mayor thereafter added: "My problem is, I am thirty three years old, whereas there are some councillors here who have seen more than fifty autumns. Therefore they should be able to tell who is this Mahatma Gandhi and what are his achievements. According to me, he must have been a great soul. Otherwise a life size statue would not have been cast in bronze."

The Senior came forward: "Mr. Mayor," he said in a serious tone. "To be frank with you, I have been a frequent visitor to this Maidan

ever since my childhood. In fact we played here cricket during our boyhood days. On no occasion did I have the chance to see this statue nor did I hear people talk about it. If we literally go by the name Mahatma Gandhi, the word Mahatma means a saintly soul. Therefore this could be a statue of one Mr. Gandhi who was perhaps a social worker or a saint. His preaching of Truth, Non-violence and Love signifies that he must have been a muni or a sanyasi. Whatever be his background this is a beautiful statue. But how it got buried is not known. The name of the person Mahatma Gandhi and the name of this place Gandhi Maidan indicate some link between the two. This statue must have been erected centuries ago and because of the statue the place must have carried the name of the person. Anyway a saintly person! Glad that we have been able to find his statue."

"Then, can we reinstall the statue here and re-affirm that the place be continued with the same name, Gandhi Maidan?" The Mayor innocently enquired. The Senior reacted: "Mr. Mayor, you know I have already proposed my father's name. After all this Mahatma Gandhi is also somebody's father whose name is not available on the pedestal. To me, he is a stranger to this place and he is a stranger to everyone here. Why this place belonging to our town should bear an outsider's name? Let this Maidan be named after my father who was a staunch supporter of the poor and the downtrodden."

"Then what shall we do with this statue? Shall we bury it again and forget this old saint?" The Backbencher angrily shouted. "I never said so!" The Senior councillor diplomatically rejoined: "After all, it is metal. Even if it is sold as a scrap, it may fetch tons of money. We can then build an orphanage for the destitute or a health home for the sick and the aged."

"I am happy you suggested that." The Backbencher reacted very sharply: "I thought you would suggest melting and recasting into a statue of your beloved father!"

"Mr. Mayor, I protest against this unwarranted and uncharitable remark." The Senior angrily shouted! The Mayor intervened. Pacifying, he said softly, "This is not an official meeting. We have come here as friends and colleagues. When we are trying to understand something new, there is bound to be a discussion and

debate resulting in friction. Without friction no heat is generated and without heat no light is produced. This is what the physical science says."

"Mr. Mayor," the Senior losing his temper, said: "I have not come here to learn the theory of light. I have come here to know specifically what has happened to my proposal to rename the Maidan after my father!"

The Mayor kept his cool. But the Backbencher shot back: "Why are you after the Mayor to have this place renamed after your father? At least tell us the achievements of your father."

"He was a great social worker." The Senior began but the Backbencher cut him short: "That way my father was also a great social worker! But I am not a fool to demand naming any street or a place after my father. As the social science goes, man is a social animal and we can term everyone as a social worker."

"Mr. Mayor!" The Senior shouted back. "This is nothing but an insult to my father and me. How this gentleman, a councillor junior to me, a tiny fry by all counts, can brand all of us as animals?"

The Backbencher lashed out: "Animal is a more respectable word. You deserve to be called a beast—selfish and cruel!"

"Yes!" The Senior shot back. "I am a beast, selfish and cruel while all of you are angels. But please listen carefully: Yesterday morning when the Chief Minister's telephone call came I requested him to change the name of this place to my father's and he readily agreed. Within a day or two the Mayor will get the official instructions. Now that all of you have insulted me, I lodge a strong protest and will not remain here even for a second!" With very quick paces he left the place! Everybody was stunned and dazed at the moves, words, action and behaviour of the Senior who by now had proved to be a villain.

The Engineer and his workforce, standing a few yards away were looking perplexed whereas the Mayor bowing down his head was looking worried. Tension-packed moments slowly ticked by.

Even though the sun was in the middle of the sky, a soothing cool breeze was blowing tenderly. Birds on the nearby trees were chirping merrily.

Like this, when the atmosphere was an inspiring one, the Mayor

got encouraged to do something positive and so he asked the Engineer to come closer. He came at once clasping his hands. All the councillors were watching what the Mayor was going to do.

The Mayor instructed in everybody's hearing: "We shall take this statue to the Municipal office and keep in a prominent place in the Council Hall to enable every citizen to have a good look. Let us find out whether anyone in the town will be able to recognise this saint and tell the names of his descendants starting from his son or sons. Let us see whose father he was!"

"Then what about this pit?" The Engineer enquired politely. "Fill it up!" Prompt came the Mayor's reply.

"Shall we commence the civil work, sir?" the Engineer sought permission. "No! Not now!" said the Mayor, "First we will have a fence and then we will level the ground. We shall thus keep everything ready. Once we sort out this issue of renaming the Maidan, we should be able to start the construction work."

Before the Mayor could convey everything, the Backbencher who always wanted to have the last word, declared openly. "Mayor sir, let us not venture renaming this Maidan after that fool's father. We will also not succumb to pressure from any quarters even if it is from the Prime Minister. If the name is going to be changed, I shall fast unto death!"

Hearing the words of warning and threat the Mayor's face became red. Without uttering a single word he walked up to the place where the Mayor's official car was parked. Not looking at anyone he silently got into the car and instructed the driver to take him home. The car sped away leaving behind a cloud of dust.

5. REWARD FOR RECOGNITION

Although he was sitting at the dinner table with his wife serving, a worried Mayor did not eat.

"Something must have definitely gone wrong somewhere!" The Mayoress thought and affectionately enquired, "Dear, are you all right to-day?"

As if he had woken up suddenly from the slumber, wearing a forced smile he hurriedly said, "I am fine. I am fine."

"No! You are not fine!" The lady remarked: "Your face indicates that you are not and so also your action. I hope everything is all right with your second wife, the Great Municipality."

Sadness writ large on his face, the Mayor repented: "I should not have come to this country at all! I feel I have been badly let down."

Hearing this, the Mayoress became anxious. She asked, "Tell me what actually has happened. After all India is our father's land. Both of us are the second generation Non-resident Indians from the United States who, in response to the appeals made by the Prime Minister from time to time, have come down to serve India. When we have come here purely out of service motive and not in search of wealth or pleasure, why should we be unhappy? I don't think there should be any cause for worry."

"Dear," there was pain in the Mayor's voice: "My position is that of a thirsty traveller chasing a mirage in an inhospitable desert. I have seen for myself that the people here do not work in a spirit of service. To quote one example, there is a place called Gandhi Maidan on the outskirts of this town. No one knows why it is called Gandhi Maidan or who is this great Gandhi in whose memory the Maidan is named. I constituted a committee to study and report on how the Maidan came to be known Gandhi Maidan. The committee failed. But strangely, the Senior councillor, who wanted to know the background, proposed that the Maidan be renamed after his father. He says his father was a great social worker. However, this proposal is not acceptable to others. In protest he did not attend the pooja ceremony yesterday."

"Shameful!" the Mayoress exclaimed biting her lip: "I am surprised the way in which the seniors behave here. More than that where do they find time for making mountains out of molehills? Ridiculous, really ridiculous! Now please tell me what had happened thereafter."

"He must have spoken to the Chief Minister and requested to have the Maidan renamed after his father. To-day in the presence of everybody he boasted that the Chief Minister will officially instruct

the Municipality to change the name of the Maidan."

"Do you take his words at face value?" The Mayoress advised with all seriousness.

"To my way of thinking nothing is impossible in this country!" He sighed heavily: "That is what I have been experiencing everyday since we landed here five years ago. The most of the politicians think of changing the name of streets, squares, circles, places, towns and cities instead of doing anything constructive to help the people to help themselves."

"I can understand your feelings, dear." The Mayoress consoled: "Before coming here we were knowing for certain that India is poor in every respect except leadership qualities, especially in respect of making sacrifices or rendering selfless service to the society. But in that respect also I think, we are getting disillusioned. Anyway, when we have come here to show the way to the people, let us suffer a little more. After all the Motherland! Without expecting anything in return, let us work for Mother India."

"Anyway that goes without saying!" The Mayor continued to narrate: "Yesterday, as a part of the pooja, I was asked by the priest to hit the ground thrice with the pickaxe to symbolise digging, and at that time I had heard a sound of metal being hit. Therefore I asked our Engineer to dig up at that place to find out what it was. Today in the presence of all the councillors, the digging, I mean excavation, took place."

"I believe no rat came out of the pit!" The Mayoress deliberately made fun of the Mayor.

He smiled and then said: "Your husband may go wrong but not His Worship the Lord Mayor." "Really?" the Mayoress asked very eagerly.

"Yes!" He said: "Beneath the ground was buried a life-size statue of a saint called Mahatma Gandhi. Now it is crystal clear that the Maidan was named after this saint."

"What was the reaction of the councillors?" The Mayoress was inquisitive.

"What reaction?" He revealed: "They knew not who he was nor were they interested in knowing it at all. With their lukewarm attitude, they took him to be a stranger not belonging to this town!"

"Now," the Mayoress was eager to know more about the new find: "Tell me please, how did you come to know that it was a statue of that so-called Mahatma Gandhi?"

"Well, let me give you a full account. It is a statue of a tall old man with feeble limbs and arms. He holds a walking stick and is in a walking posture. There is a loincloth around his waist above the knees and also a shawl covering his shoulders and chest. Baldhead, broad smile and spectacles over the nose. On the whole the old man with a straight back looks very graceful and saintly. "

"Where is the statue now?" The Mayoress was all eagerness: "Can I not have a look?"

The Mayor answered: "They are cleaning it now. Once it is cleaned and polished it will be kept in our Council Hall for public exhibition so that all can see. Surprisingly the statue had a built-in pedestal on which there is an inscription. Unfortunately for us, the pedestal is slightly damaged and so some of the words are defaced beyond recognition."

"Is it so?" Now her eagerness knew no bounds: "At least tell me what do the legible words have to say?" She enquired.

"The inscription reads 'Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of...'" The Mayor stopped for a while and said, "after 'Father of...' the words here are not clear as the pedestal is slightly damaged. I asked all the councillors who was the son or daughter of Mahatma Gandhi. But no one was able to tell. Thus the statue had become an object of mystery with none in this town to unravel it for the present."

"Why do you like to unravel the mystery?"

"I wanted to know whether on this earth, there are any descendants of this saint. For this reason I have decided to keep the statue under public gaze in the Council Hall where it can draw the attention of every visitor so that one day I should be able to know who was the son of the saint."

A sudden idea came to the lady's mind. At once, she said: "Dear, I have a suggestion to make. Announce a prize of Rs.5,000/- to anyone who gives you this information. They must furnish authentic information, of course with proof. In this process who knows, the descendants themselves might come forward."

“That is a good suggestion. Very good indeed! Let me announce the reward and see the result.”

6. THE PRINCIPAL ARRIVES

The statue of Mahatma Gandhi was kept for public view in the middle of the Council Hall. After it was thoroughly polished, the bronze statue, to everybody's amazement, started shining like gold. The first visitor happened to be the Mayoress herself who took enough care to go around the statue clasping her hands and bowing her head reverentially. Like this, going round three times, she touched the feet and placed flowers in front of the statue, which was in a walking posture. After doing this, she spared enough time to go through the obliterated inscription. Yes! After the phrase “Father of...” something important was missing.

She was happy that her suggestion to announce a reward of Rs. 5000/- to anyone who gave the clue to complete the phrase, “Father of...” was accepted by the City Fathers and this she could see for herself from the placard at the entrance of the Council Hall itself.

The local newspapers, giving wide publicity, carried the story of the excavation and also the new find. Instead of bronze, they exaggerated it to be of gold and the age of the statue not less than 500 years!

The news spread like wild fire and the citizens started pouring in, carrying flowers and fruits to be offered to the saint. Such of those who had hurriedly arrived to catch a glimpse without the flowers and fruits thought it fit to make offerings of coins and currency notes at the feet of the statue.

Round the clock, the Engineer and his men, besides the local police, were keeping a strict vigil over the statue.

The Senior, however, was a bit upset and felt sad at the sight of the crowds flocking to the Council Hall to catch a glimpse of the statue with offerings as though they were going to a temple to seek the grace of God. It was unpalatable for him when people around would describe in his hearing that the town grew and became prosperous only on account of the saint's blessings and benedictions,

though he lay hidden beneath the ground in the Maidan. "The growing popularity of this saint will definitely crush my dream of renaming the Maidan after my father. At this rate, people will never tolerate any change of name. Therefore, I have to stop this and create an impression that the statue is only a show-piece and nothing beyond that." He thought of something and remembered his old friend, the Principal of the local college. The Senior and the Principal sat together, burnt midnight oil and hatched several plots to take advantage of the limited knowledge of the Mayor about India in general and the Mahatma in particular, so that they could have the Maidan renamed after the Senior's father.

Three days later,

As the Mayor was busy in his chamber going through some of the official papers, he heard a gentle knock at the door.

"Come in!" he said loudly. Soon the door was opened and he heard "Good Morning, Mr. Mayor! May I come in?" the Mayor raised his head. It was the Senior seeking permission. The Mayor was surprised to see him seek permission to enter. "Please come in, sir." Standing up, he warmly welcomed the visitor, forgetting all that had happened.

The Senior drew a chair meant for the visitors in front of the Mayor's table and asked, "Can I sit down?"

The Mayor smiled and said, "Please do not stand on ceremonies. We are all the members of a single team."

"Yes, you are our Captain!" He pretended to be friendly and respectful: "After all Mayor is Mayor!"

"Why all these pleasantries today?" A sudden thought crossed the Mayor's enquiring mind: "I hope he is not coaxing cunningly like the fox in Aesop's fable, that flattered the poor crow to drop the cheese from its beak." However, not revealing his mind, the Mayor asked, "I hope everything is well with the town."

"Yes, Mr. Mayor!" The Senior slowly revealed the purpose of his visit: "Today we are going to have a guest here. The Principal of the local college, a learned person. He is a holder of triple MAs."

"Triple MAs?" The Mayor appreciated: "Great!"

Replied the Senior: "Yes, MA in History, MA in Politics and MA in Philosophy!"

“What a rare combination!” Exclaimed the Mayor.

“Really a rare one!” The Senior said: “I have invited him specifically to have a look at the statue and unlock the mystery you are referring to.”

“Good!” the Mayor heartily appreciated: “It will be a great service to the poor old saint, if the Principal is going to tell who was this Mahatma Gandhi and what were his accomplishments. Then, of course, the name of his son or daughter should also be told to us. I am sure that the Principal will definitely win the reward.”

“Why the reward of a paltry sum of only Rs.5000/- sir?” The Senior sarcastically added: “I have assured him greater things.”

“Greater things?” the Mayor wondered.

“Yes, of course! The college needs additional space for expansion. Their application for land by way of a free grant is pending with the Standing Committee for the last seven years. I have assured him that it will be taken up this time.”

“I am not aware of any pending application!” the Mayor was apologetic: “I do not know why the papers should be kept pending for such a long time. Can we not say, ‘Yes!’ or ‘No!’ within three to six months?”

The Senior smiled: “Things do not move that fast in Government and Municipal offices, sir. The papers move only if there is pressure either by way of money power or political power.”

“Disgraceful!” The Mayor said scornfully: “We call ourselves, a civilised society but everyone of us acts as a savage.” He wanted to condemn saying something more but in the next instant controlled his excitement. Fortunately for him, at the nick of time, his personal secretary came in and announced: “Sir, the Principal.”

“Usher him in, please!” the Mayor permitted and to receive the guest, he stood up. “I will go and receive. Please do not take the trouble.” the Senior volunteered. He then walked towards the door. However, before he could reach, the secretary opened the door and led the Principal in.

“Welcome!” The Senior outstretched his arm and gaily shook his hands and took him to the Mayor.

The Mayor joined his palms respectfully and said, “Namaste!”

The Principal, a middle-aged person, reciprocated by uttering, "Namaste!"

"Please have your seat!" the Mayor offered. As soon as he sat down, the Mayor occupied his seat. Smiling, he said, "We are meeting for the first time, I suppose!"

"Right you are!" The Principal warmly accepted: "I did not have an occasion to come down here. Then rarely do I go out of the campus. My college, my students and my duties - this is the small world in which I live and work." He heartily laughed.

"Why do you say so, sir?" The Mayor too laughed: "That way today's world is too small to be called big. You know they call it a global village. After all that is how you view it!"

"You are right!" the Principal nodded assent. By then an attendant brought tea. He placed the cups in front of the Mayor, the visitor and the Senior and then quietly withdrew himself.

"Please have it, sir! It is Mayor's tea!" The Mayor cut a joke.

"In Mayor's chamber everything is at the Mayor's pleasure!" The guest also cut a joke in reply.

"But not here, sir!" The Mayor said, "We take all decisions democratically."

"Serving tea also?" The Principal looked surprised.

"That is why I said, Mayor's tea!" The Mayor winked.

Finishing the tea, the Principal said, "You must be knowing the purpose of my visit."

"Still it is better you tell me." The Mayor requested apologetically: "Just now I came to know that your appeal for some grant is pending with us!"

"Forget about that!" The Principal scornfully said: "We will not spoil our first meeting discussing some unsavoury things."

"I am glad you said it!" The Mayor appreciated: "Shall we go to the Council Hall where the statue is kept for public view?"

"Sure! We shall finish that task first." The Principal stood up. The Mayor then led him to the Hall, followed by the Senior who somehow was now looking cold and indifferent as they walked towards the Hall.

When they reached, there were only a few visitors who had come to make offerings to the saint. Therefore, the Mayor took the Principal straight to the statue.

The Principal neither joined his palms in salutation to the saint nor touched his feet. He stood in front gazing for a while and then went round in slow paces. Observing minutely he touched the timepiece on the left hand side of the saint and stroked the staff from top to bottom. Bowing his head, he read carefully the words inscribed and thereafter from his pocket took his notebook and pen and jotted down whatever he could see in the inscription. He saw the placard announcing the reward of Rs. 5000/- smiled and then nodded his head. When he was doing like this, the Mayor and the Senior watched him inquisitively without batting the eyes.

The Principal then came up to them and smiling brightly as though he had won the reward, asked, "Shall we?"

"Yes!" Nodded the Mayor, but being unable to control his eagerness, enquired: "Sir, any breakthrough?"

"We shall talk it over in your chamber!" The Principal whispered with a wink.

And they returned silently to the Mayor's chamber.

7. SCULPTOR'S IMAGINATION

As soon as the Mayor sat down on his high seat, the Senior and the Principal took their seats on the same chairs they had earlier occupied.

"Before we discuss further, can we have as a stimulant, a second round of tea?" the Mayor asked the Principal.

"A cup of tea is always welcome," the Principal smiled brightly.

"But this time it is not the Mayor's tea but the Municipal canteen tea!" the Mayor cut a joke.

"Well," the Principal wanted to know. "What is the difference between the two?"

"The Mayor's tea comes from the Mayor's Bungalow twice a day," the Mayor explained. "Limited quantity for the VIPs only. Once that is finished then I order from the canteen."

"How good is the tea from the canteen?" The Principal asked. But before the Mayor could answer, the Senior interrupted: "After all it is the tea to be served in the Mayor's chamber. The canteen owner cannot afford to sending an inferior quality and incur the displeasure of the supreme authority of the Municipality."

Without giving any opinion, the Mayor smiled and pressed the bell and at once the attendant appeared. Without allowing the Mayor to say anything, the Senior ordered: "Get three cups of tea. Tell the canteen people to make good tea!" The attendant nodded his head obediently and went out.

Now the Principal dramatically opened his notebook and quickly glanced through all that he had jotted down and with an air of seriousness declared he, "Mr. Mayor, this is a beautiful statue, very beautiful indeed! But according to me, it is nothing beyond a showpiece. I don't think that it is statue of any person, living or dead!"

The Mayor was surprised. His mouth fell open out of surprise. "Professor," he remarked after a while, "did you say that this is a handiwork of a sculptor?"

"Yes, you are right!" The Principal touched the edge of his spectacles and declared authoritatively: "The statue itself bears enough evidence to prove my statement!" By then the tea came. Sipping the tea, the Mayor confidently told, "But, Professor, the statue bears an inscription in which the name Mahatma Gandhi is clearly stated. Tell me, how can a showpiece bear a name like that? Gandhi is a very popular surname in Gujarat, I learn."

The Principal did not react to that instantly. He gulped down his cup of tea and continued to narrate: "Mr. Mayor, as you know, I teach History and I am an M.A. in History. I specialised in the Ancient Indian History and also the Mediaeval Indian History. The Ancient History gives all the names of the sages and the seers of the days of yore, while the Mediaeval History, the names of the saints and teachers of the middle ages. There is no seer or saint by the name Mahatma Gandhi during both these periods. Actually no saint was born in India after the seventeenth century. So this statue cannot be of any saint. I bet it can't be!"

The way in which the Principal was advancing his argument

stunned the Mayor. Still not revealing his mind, he enquired as innocently as possible: "Then what is your opinion about the words, 'Non-violence, Truth and Love?' "

"Well, the Principal dramatically stroked his hair and said, "As an M.A. also in Philosophy, I must say that these are the words from the teachings of Gautama Buddha which the Emperor Ashoka later propagated. Ask any student of Indian Philosophy, they will tell that these are the immortal words of Buddha."

The Mayor smiled meaningfully. Not willing to give up easily he categorically asked, "Then, sir, why should these words find a place in the inscription on the pedestal of this statue?"

The Principal who had come prepared for any argument thought for a while and then said, "Oh, yes! There is a valid point in what you say. But think of the good old days. There were no books and no means of mass communication. Therefore statues and pillars were erected not only to attract people but also to educate them."

"But the statue bears the name Mahatma Gandhi which even a child can read." The Mayor was very emphatic. "The surname 'Gandhi' is very much in existence even today. And some of the national leaders of the day have it, which you must also be aware. What do you say about that?"

"That is what exactly I was about to tell even without your asking for it." The Principal diplomatically stated: "The name is given only to mislead. Observe the statue very minutely. There is a timepiece hanging on the left-hand side. The old man wears spectacles. The footwear resembles exactly likes the ones of the modern times. No saint of the middle ages can boast of these."

"Sounds very interesting!" Heart of heart the Mayor understood what the Principal was up to. Instead of cutting him short, bringing the discussion to end and asking him to leave at once with the words 'rubbish' he decided to continue with one sided argument that seemed to be much more than the mere fiction. So to keep it going he deliberately pointed out: "I am yet to be convinced in this behalf. You know there is a mention of the phrases like war against illiteracy, poverty and disease. Then, that political freedom! What do all these mean? As a layman, I am keen on knowing more about them."

The Principal got encouraged to speak something different now. He eloquently said, "You know, there is a heavy demand abroad for the idols and statues from India. Idols worth crores of rupees are smuggled out illegally. Taking advantage of the craze for such items, I am told a lot of fake ones are being made in this country solely with the objective of minting quick money."

"Then do you believe that this statue is a fake one?" The Mayor openly asked.

"It is not a fake one. Definitely it is not." The Principal then added: "All that I said was it is not a statue of a person living now or dead some years ago. It is only a showpiece and nothing beyond that. Otherwise..."

"Professor, kindly go ahead!" the Mayor encouraged him to narrate something more.

"Well, the Principal said, "I wanted to tell something which I have forgotten now! Let me recollect what I wanted to tell a few moments ago and then come back to you."

"Then till you collect your thoughts, will you please permit me to put one more question, sir?" The Mayor asked.

"Oh yes, by all means!"

"Assuming that the statue was a showpiece born out of a sculptor's imagination, why did it remain buried in the Maidan?"

For that the Principal had this to state: "I have already answered that question. Hundreds of idols and statues are smuggled out of the country every year. This could be one among them on the way out. Not getting an opportunity for an early shipment or to make it look like an antique they must have buried so that it would lose its lustre, get some stains or scratches or something to get defaced like the words in the inscription. We have already seen this in the case of caption of this statue. All that I say in conclusion is that the statue was buried only to bide time either ways!"

"And they must have named the place Gandhi Maidan to remind them of their fortune. Am I right, professor?" The Mayor now cut him short.

But the Principal was on a bigger mission than merely describing the statue. He did not want to end up the discussion abruptly by

offending the feelings of the Mayor at any cost. "Your assumptions are definitely correct!" He mechanically agreed.

"Professor, I have one or two more doubts now," the Mayor said. "I hope you will clear all my doubts, not minding my asking some silly questions."

"Why not?" the Principal stated: "The very purpose of my visit is to clear the cobwebs if any in our minds."

"You must have seen the caption of 'Father of..' after the name, Mahatma Gandhi." The Mayor politely pointed out.

In reply the Principal explained, "That is what exactly I wanted to tell you a few moments ago. The Indian system while introducing a person is first to tell his name and then his father's. For example we say Mr. So & So, son of Mr. So & So, (the Senior). Rarely do we say Mr. So & So, father of Mr. So and So unless the son is more powerful or famous, than the father or the son is already known to us where as the father is not. If the Mahatma was a well known figure or a saint, where was the need to tell his son's name?"

"There is a mention of political freedom in the inscription. What does it indicate?" The Mayor enquired. The Principal thought for a while and said, "The person who got this statue cast must have been very resourceful. He wanted to convey certain things but indirectly. It is just like a sugarcoated pill. Outwardly it is sweet, but inwardly very bitter. As an MA in Political Science also, I can tell this much: It is well known all over that the politicians are on the top of the world today. They can make or mar the future of the globe at a single stroke of a pen. The future of the world as a whole is in the hands of a few, only a few politicians whom we can count in number by making use of our fingers. Within no time they can reduce this earth into a heap of ashes or a cloud of dust by misusing nuclear weapons with a mere click of the mouse attached to a computer. Conflict between any two countries, only two countries, is sufficient to trigger of a world war causing wide spread destruction. And these politicians! To meet their ends they always want the commoners to be in poverty, illiteracy and disease. This is what I could read between the lines in the inscription." After telling like this; the Principal looked silently at the Mayor's face as if waiting for his reaction. By then, it looked as though he had completely

exhausted his pile of imagination.

The Mayor did not react, nor did he feel like reacting. He bowed his head down pondering over the words of the Principal, which he felt had no relevance to the inscription that could be read and understood without much difficulty. "What is this Principal up to?" wondered he.

After watching the Mayor's face for a while, the Principal slowly stated, "Mr. Mayor, if you permit, I would like to convey you something important." The Mayor raised his head and said, "Yes, Professor, please go ahead. There should be no hesitation whatsoever."

Taking courage, the Principal slowly stated, "I am not referring to the request pending with you for the land, by way of a grant for our college. You know this gentleman, the Senior very well. I learn he has requested to name Gandhi Maidan after his father's. I hope you will oblige as recognition to his services to this town. More than that with this you will also respect local sentiments."

Not expressing anything, the Mayor smiled.

The Principal added, "I know that you are caught in a dilemma as that wretched fellow, the Backbencher has revolted against his proposal. But as a shrewd person maintaining a good balance you can amicably solve the problem, if you desire. There is a square near Hanuman Temple and you can propose to have the square named after his father. The Backbencher is an ardent devotee of Bajrangbali. Therefore, he may not decline this proposal. Like this you can keep both the Senior councillors happy. Am I right?" He looked at the Senior and sought his approval. The Senior at once nodded his head. Then very enthusiastically he said, "I have no objection. All that I need is that my father's name should appear on the Maidan in his memory."

"Why are you so particular about the Maidan? Can we not name some other place in the town in his memory?" The Mayor wanted to know.

"Well," the Senior slowly explained. "During his childhood days my father used to take the cattle to the Maidan for grazing. He was fond of that place till his death. That's why I want the place to be named after him." The Mayor smiled: "Tell me, your father, was he

not a devotee of the guardian deity of this town, Hanumanji and was he not visiting His temple?"

"Of course," the Senior had this to say: "He was a great devotee. He used to visit the temple twice a day, morning as well as evening till he breathed his last. He was attending all the programmes of the temple."

"Then," the Mayor observed, "in all fairness, the square in front of the temple should bear the name of your father and not the Backbencher's. That is your legitimate right!"

"That would have been ideal!" the Senior accepted. "But I have already given a wide publicity that Gandhi Maidan would be named after my father. If it is not going to take place, my prestige would be at stake. My political career would be ruined." He looked helpless, desperate and his face looked as if he had no future at all. The Mayor wanted to tell something. But the Professor took charge of the situation and asked, "Mr. Mayor, if you don't mind, may I interrupt for a while?"

"Sure! By all means! Please go ahead. There should be no hesitation when you people are here to solve some of the problems relating to the statue. Let there be a frank and open discussion."

The Principal thought that he should hit the opportunity now. He asked, "Mr. Mayor, why are you so particular and rigid about retaining the name Gandhi Maidan when none in the town knew about the background? Thousands came and thousands went back paying their respects to the statue. But none could tell us who was the son or daughter of this Great Gandhi. Assuming that he was living, definitely he did not belong to this place. Presently there is no Gandhi family living in this entire township. The Senior's father was living here. His son, the Senior is sitting just before you who has rendered a lot of service to the people over here. Can we not honour the memory of a local resident instead of some unknown soul? These are the days of local sentiments, local people and local political parties. The days of thinking of 'national level' are dead and gone. Kindly try to understand the reality."

The Mayor was not carried away by his oratory. He was not in a hurry to react fast, either. Lecturers and professors were known for this type of bombastic language and ideas that could never be

practically implemented thought he. But the people sitting opposite to him deserve some fitting reply. Thinking like this, he slowly stated, "Professor, to be frank with you I am not particular about any name. In fact, I never took the issue of the name seriously till we stumbled upon the statue that suggested a very clear link between Mahatma Gandhi and Gandhi Maidan. We, the people belonging to the present generation may be ignorant of the story or the background of the Maidan but that does not mean that we can tamper with the unknown past changing the name today. If we do so, the generation next to us may not pardon us if the person happened to be a personality, much greater than the Senior's father. As I am occupying a position of great responsibilities, I am accountable at all times for my actions while in office or after my tenure. Let me not assure you anything till the mystery of the statue is solved."

But the Mayor's words had virtually no impact on the Principal. Sticking to his own views he stated, "As a teacher of Politics, I always believe that the past is dead and gone and the future is yet to arrive. Therefore we should aim at living successfully today and today only. A politician strives hard to live successfully in this way. Let me tell you something more: A politician's ship sails in any direction if it is going to yield him something more." The Mayor could not make out what he meant and he did not wish to understand also. All that he expressed was, "Sorry! I am no politician and I don't wish to be one also. I have come to this country from the States to serve my father's land and my people to the extent possible. Service is my aim and not occupying the position of the Chief Minister or the Prime Minister of this country."

"Excuse me!" The Principal diplomatically apologised. "Mr. Mayor, I don't want to hurt your feelings. After all each one of us has his own aims and ideals. Let us respect each other's views. If you permit, I will make one more suggestion that should appeal to every one."

"Mayor's doors are always open to visitors and the suggestions. But in his Chamber he is the master. So in his chamber decisions are his. Nobody should force decisions on him!" He heartily laughed with an air of abundant self-confidence.

"Of course," the Principal accepted as politely as possible. "The First Citizen is always the First Citizen. There is no second opinion"

about that. Here is my humble submission: If you change the name of Gandhi Maidan into the name suggested by my friend, I am offering to rename our college after this unknown saint Mahatma Gandhi whoever or whatever could he be. Then if you gift that statue to the college, I will see that it will be installed in a prominent place in the campus. With this perhaps all the problems will be solved. Rather than a vacant Maidan carrying his name it should be a great honour to that unknown Mahatma Gandhi if our college is named after him. Please consider this offer of mine!"

"Absurd!" the Mayor reacted very sharply: "If it is going to be a great honour why can't you rename your college in the name of the Senior's father and erect a statue of his, to respect the local sentiments? Now gentlemen, let us not waste our time till such time that I am convinced that this Mahatma Gandhi and Gandhi Maidan has no historical background. I will not venture any change in the name now. Sorry! If you have anything else to discuss you may kindly do so."

But the Principal had nothing else to discuss. Not willing to change the subject, though he felt very uncomfortable, he wanted to make the final bid and so ventured to say, "Mr. Mayor, with all the limitations and constraints you have, I appeal to you to give second thoughts to all the suggestions I have made and take a suitable decision. In this country there are a good number of instances where people have lost their lives in the agitations launched for renaming colleges, universities, towns, cities and also states. Let this little town not witness such tragic incidents. I am not holding out a threat but I am sounding a note of caution since you are comparatively new to this town and also the country."

The Mayor understood what Principal had meant. Though he had stated that it was not a threat it was nothing short of a threat.

As soon as they were gone, the Private Secretary came in and reported, "Sir, as they were going out, the Principal was commenting that you would not budge unless pressure is brought on you from the Chief Minister. Without directly referring your name they called you a prig!"

"Fools," the Mayor full of contempt exclaimed, "Fortunately for me they did not come up with the title of 'Pig' I will not care for any remarks nor will I accept any suggestion of renaming Gandhi

Maidan. If they approach next time, I shall offer them to rename the fish market instead of Gandhi Maidan. Fools, really great fools!"

8. AT HANUMAN'S TEMPLE

All this happened on Monday and the next four days went off in a routine manner. Saturday the Mayor attended the office for a couple of hours and returned home.

The Mayoress before serving food to the Mayor, suggested: "Dear, it is ages ever since we have visited a temple and made offerings. All these days I did not want to disturb you. Can you spare some time this evening?" As soon as he heard the word temple, Mayor's imagination stirred up and his eyes shone brightly for a while as if he was waiting for this opportunity. "When you are embarking on a lot of plans, God's grace is very essential!" The lady opened up her heart in a soft and touching voice.

The Mayor smiled and affectionately said, "My fair lady, your suggestion is accepted. We shall definitely make it today. Tell me what do you want to carry as an offering." The Mayoress was happy. "Dear," she said musically, "but you did not tell which temple we should go!"

"The suggestion to visit a temple came from the Honourable First Lady. Therefore, the choice is hers! I am here only to carry out!" The Mayor laughed, softly touching her cheeks. "Sorry, no romance please," the Mayoress pretended to be angry. "You are the Mayor and you should know which is the main temple of this town!"

"Then today we shall visit Bajrangbali Hanumanji's temple." The Mayor suggested: "We shall carry flowers and fruits and some coins as an offering to the deity!"

"Coins? Disgraceful!"

"Then a ten rupee note?"

"Shameful! You are the First Citizen of this town and you must not degrade your position."

"But in front of Hanuman, I am a humble human being!"

"Don't belittle yourself! God has given us enough to eat and live with!"

"Then, I leave the matter to my Home Minister. Madam, please take care of me!" He smiled winking his eyes.

"Don't be a henpecked husband!" she looked round to make sure that no servant was overhearing or looking at them. Then she continued to state, "I don't know what sort of a Mayor you are. No firm decision—no firm opinion. Always smiling and always speaking sweet words!"

"That is all because of the grace of Mother Goddess!" He joked.

"Who is the Mother Goddess? Tell me the name!" she insisted.

"Don't you know?" He smiled: "It is Mahakali, the terrible form of Mother Goddess, Durga."

"Really?" She asked innocently: "Where is Her temple?"

"There is no temple for Her!" He laughed. "In my heart She resides."

"Heart? What do you talk?"

"Not in my heart. But in my home!"

"Home? Please speak something sensible!"

"Madam, I don't speak non-sense. Here is my Mahakali standing before me in Her majestic form, serving me the food. Sorry, I have erred, she is not Mahakali but Bhadrakali, the Mother Goddess in the most auspicious and graceful form." Then the Mayor added musically, "Behind every successful man there is..."

"Stop it! I don't want to hear that saying!" She cut him short but somehow her face became red with blushes and her eyes shone and twinkled like stars.

Evening came and the Mayor and the Mayoress went to the temple. In order to avoid the public gaze and publicity, instead of the official car, the Mayor took his personal car and drove, his wife sitting next to him in the front seat. They had carried a basket full of flowers and fruits to be offered to the deity.

Saturday being Hanuman's day, there was an unusually big crowd and the devotees therefore had formed a long queue so that one after another could go into the temple in an orderly way, have the 'darshan', perform a circumambulation, offer prayers and offerings

and then come out after receiving the 'prasad' from the priests.

Parking the car away from the temple the Mayor and the lady walked up to the queue and stood waiting for their turn to come. The sun had already set and the dusk had begun to fall. Yet the things were clearly visible. While they were standing, the Mayor surveyed the temple as he was visiting for the first time. The high tower of the temple made of white marble was full of carvings and a colourful flag atop was fluttering gaily in the evening breeze. The saffron coloured idol of Hanuman was a huge one and was quite visible even from a distance. Here Hanuman was in a standing posture carrying a heavy mace on His shoulder, as if Bajrangbal was going for an eternal war against the evil forces, to afford protection to the people on the right path.

As the darkness started enveloping the earth, the temple bells started ringing and the priests lighted the traditional lamps in front of the idol, and in the glow of the lights Hanuman looked more powerful with a grand splendour.

When their turn came, the Mayor and the Mayoress entered the temple, had darshan, offered flowers and fruits along with a hundred rupee note. The officiating priest, noticing the high denomination note looked up to find out, who these devotees were. But he could not recognise them at all. However, taking them to be rich and respectable devotees, he garlanded the Mayor taking one from the idol and made a 'tilak' of sandalwood paste on his forehead as a mark of benediction, chanting loudly a hymn in praise of Hanumanji. Then he also gave some flowers and a fruit to the Mayoress blessing her profusely. Claspng their hands and bowing down their head before the deity they offered silent prayers and with that their visit to the temple was over. Feeling fully satisfied with the visit they slowly came out with a sense of fulfilment and relief that nobody had noticed or recognised them.

However as they reached the road, the Mayor heard from behind somebody call out loudly, "Mayor sir! Mayor sir!" Turning his head back, the Mayor stood wondering. Within no time, a person from a nearby lane emerged. In the dim light his face was not visible but as he drew closer and closer the Mayor could recognize. Yes, it was none other than the Backbencher! With a grand smile he stood

before the Mayor, joined his palms and in a complaining tone said, "Mayor sir, this is not fair. Really not fair!"

"What is the unfair thing that you are referring to?" the Mayor asked while the Mayoress looked perplexed.

"Madam," the Backbencher with all seriousness expressed: "Should the Mayor of this town, the first citizen, stand in the queue like a commoner? Had I known earlier, I would have organized an official visit with all the paraphernalia befitting the official position of the Mayor sir occupied. I feel this is really unfair. Really!"

To the Mayor, his words sounded strange. He laughed at the whole idea of giving him the royal treatment in the abode of Hanumanji. "After all we have come here to offer prayers. In front of God all are equal—the rich or the poor, high or the low. In the abode of God why should we get a special treatment basing on the status and the position when all are his children?" The Backbencher was in no mood to accept this philosophy of the Mayor's, which the society at large also never accepted! Sticking to his point of view, he categorically declared, "As I have already said the Mayor is Mayor. When he is the first citizen of the town what is wrong in getting respect and honour? Anyway as we cannot undo whatever that has happened, there is no point in discussing again and again!"

The Mayor laughed touching his shoulder. "Now tell me what brought you here. Have you come here to have the 'darshan' like we people?"

"I hope you are not making fun of me," the Backbencher told: "I am the councillor of this locality."

"Is that so? I never knew it. Now tell me the jurisdiction of the Senior." The Mayor wanted to know.

"Why do you want all these details, sir, when you have everything on your table with the map of this township? Anyway the Mayor of the town is asking and I am obliged to give him an answer in obedience. Mayor sir, the Senior has a very vast area. Starting from the Municipal Fish Market it goes round the local college and then ends up in Gandhi Maidan. He is an undisputed leader of those localities!"

But the Mayor did not mind anybody's being a leader in his respective locality. When he was elected by the people, there was

nothing to grudge about. Going back to the first question he had put, he reminded, "You never told me why you are here!"

"Well, I live in the locality. Can you see that lane?" He pointed to a nearby lane. "That is where exactly I live. I request you to spare sometime and drop in at my place now." The Mayor looked at his wife who at once accepting the invitation without any hesitation, said, "It is our pleasure. After all when you are a friend and wellwisher of ours, how can we decline that too when we have come so close to the threshold of your house?"

The Backbencher's happiness knew no bounds. He was really happy as if angels were gracing by a visit to his home to bless him and his family!

9. RENAMING SPREE

Led by the Backbencher, the Mayor and his wife took no time to reach his house. As soon as they had entered, he offered them chairs to sit down and called his wife who instantly came out of the kitchen wiping her palms on her sari's end. When the Backbencher introduced the guests she at once joined her palms respectfully and said, "Namaste!" By then his children, two sons and two daughters came out. They looked at the guests for a while, came forward and touched their feet seeking blessings. Both the Mayor and the Mayoress after blessing, enquired their names one after the other. Introduction over, following their mother the children went inside allowing their father to speak to the guests.

The Backbencher began the conversation asking, "Mayor, sir, how many kids do you have?"

The Mayor looked at his wife silently. She smiled for a while and then answered, "One boy and one girl!"

"But I have never seen them," the Backbencher wondered. The Mayor laughed for a while and then suddenly became serious. Looking worried, slowly he revealed, "We are not blessed with children so far. Girl means she and boy means I. We try to hide our agony of not having the children in this way!"

Hearing this, all of a sudden the Backbencher fell silent. God had given everything except the offspring. What a pity, thought he. Not finding suitable words to console the childless couple he bowed his head down but after a few moments a sudden thought struck his mind. He stood up at once excited and pronounced, "To our great Hanumanji nothing is impossible if He makes up his mind. Honestly! Now that you have come all the way as commoners, made offerings out of pure devotion will He not bless you with children? I am sure, He will, before long! Still after you finish the visit here let us visit the Temple again and I will ask the head priest to offer special prayers in this respect and give you 'prasad'. Let us see, why our Hanumanji can't bless you, when He blesses thousand others!"

All the while, the Mayoress was listening to his words carefully and when he finished she devoutly joined her palms, closed her eyes for a while and whispered a silent prayer, "May this become a reality!" By then the lady of the house brought in three glasses of sweet limejuice. She offered first to the guests and then to her husband. As they were sipping, the Backbencher's wife slowly described, "Our Hanumanji is really powerful. In fact we ourselves were not blessed with children for a long time after wedding. Both of us were going to the temple every morning and evening and offering prayers to Him and lo! He answered our prayers and gave the gift, one after the other."

"How many years one has to pray?" the Mayoress asked innocently.

"No one can answer this question, precisely," the Mayor interrupted. "Perhaps only Hanumanji can. According to me devotion is not a commercial transaction where you give money by one hand and receive whatever you desire by another hand. Devotion consists of faith, aim and abundant patience."

Disappointed a little, the Mayoress bowed her head down as if to think over. But the Backbencher felt it was not a difficult proposition when Hanumanji was at hand. Just like Municipal Council Meetings where he was wont to dissent, he declared, "Madam, I don't want to be philosophical like Mayor sir. I am always simple and straightforward. To me, my Hanumanji is every thing. He has answered all my prayers even at a moment's notice. I shall pray for both of you and I am quite certain that He would never let

me down. After all this is our Hanumanji. He is not like Hanumanji's of other temples in other places. Here He stands as the Guardian Deity of the city in all His splendour, glory and majesty to afford protection to every citizen of this township. Therefore He is duty-bound to grant the boon and fulfil the desires of all the residents of this town including me and my Mayor!" The words, Guardian Deity kept on ringing in the ears of the Mayor for some time. Being unable to understand the inner meaning he asked, "Did you say, 'Guardian Deity?' "

"Yes, this was an oft-told story by my father when I was young," the Backbencher enthusiastically narrated: "During one of the rainy seasons there was a very heavy rainfall continuously for ten days. As a result, Sarayu, the tiny rivulet bordering our town was flooded and water entered the town at a terrific speed like the billows of the sea. Knowing not what to do, people became panicky and thought of seeking help only from Hanumanji and all of them ran to the temple seeking His protection. The floodwaters mercilessly flowed everywhere causing havoc including the elevated Gandhi Maidan but miraculously left this temple untouched. Who can therefore tell about the greatness and glory of Hanumanji who has His own mysterious ways of fulfilling the desires and wishes of the devotees who seek His shelter and protection?" Concluding like this he joined his palms in salutation to the Guardian Deity.

The Mayor also clasped his hands and appreciated: "The story is really an inspiring one especially when you take into consideration the fact that the temple is situated in a place lower than Gandhi Maidan. As you have expressed, since He is the Guardian Deity of this town, our Hanumanji must have shouldered commendably well the responsibility of protecting the citizens of this town. Glory to Him and His name!" The Backbencher looked happy. Seizing the opportunity the Mayor slowly introduced the topic asking, "Now from the spiritual world shall we descend down to the practical one? Tell me what is the name of this particular locality?"

"Why?" the Backbencher innocently answered: "There is no name, sir!"

"Then how about naming the square over here after your father's name?" He looked deep into the eyes of the Backbencher as if to find an answer there. For a while, the Backbencher did not react. In

fact first he became pensive and then sad. He bowed his head down as if it had become very heavy with thoughts lingering in the mind for a long time. Then slowly he raised his head and enquired, "Mayor sir, tell me frankly whether this is your suggestion or you are speaking on behalf of somebody else?"

"Why?" the Mayor pretended as though it was his proposal: "Don't harbour any doubt in this respect. I learn your father was an ardent devotee of Hanumanji."

"But, sir," the Backbencher pleaded, "that does not entitle him to have this place named after him. After all Hanumanji is the deity here and not my father."

"But, I was told your father was a social worker too." The Mayor laughing inwardly, suggested. "At least that should outweigh your sentiments and feelings."

Hearing the word, 'social worker' the Backbencher at once stood up, excited: "Mayor sir, did you say social worker? I hate this very word social worker. Conferring the title of social worker on a person after one's demise is nothing short of social injustice if he had not served the society during his lifetime. Please tell me honestly who gave you the idea of naming this locality after my father. I beg for this favour!"

The Mayor did not respond quickly. After a while, making fun of him, he said, "During the next council meeting, I am planning to propose that all the councillors in their respective localities can think of naming after their father something: A lane, a street, a water tank, a park, a bridge, a primary school or a primary health centre. After we complete this exercise of renaming perhaps we can settle down to attend to constructive work for the welfare of the township as a whole. How do you like this idea?"

The Backbencher heartily laughed: "Looks funny. But do you really want to suggest this?"

"Why not?" He smiled: "I would like to show the way to the whole world. Once we accomplish this feat, I would also like to send a circular to all the Municipalities in the country to follow suit. Just think of its multiplier effect. With this, we would be solving the problem once for all—all over the country. Everywhere there will be new names to herald a new era of plenty and prosperity."

Then there will be rivers and rivers of milk and honey flowing across the length and breadth of our country. With new names, new thinking will come and with new thinking new outlook will generate and with new outlook there will be a complete change in the vision that should take us to new heights of progress and prosperity with heaps of diamonds and gold available in plenty on the open ground to be picked up by all taking merely a spade and a basket. What a great achievement it would be if this were going to be carried out! And mind you, all this is possible with a simple exercise of change of name!"

The idea was beyond the comprehension of the Backbencher. With all humility, he joined his palms and told respectfully, "Are you making fun of me or what? On no occasion, I have asked for naming anything after my father. We are all simple folks. We want to serve people without expecting anything in return. Believe me, sir!"

"Fine!" the Mayor appreciated: "Then why are you against the move of renaming Gandhi Maidan?"

"Well, sir," the Backbencher was very frank. All that he revealed was that it was not a deserving case at all. He normally supported everything that was just and good. And that in case the Mayor wanted to change the name it should be after the Senior's mother.

"Why, mother?" the Mayor wanted to know.

"For having given birth to a noble son like the Senior!" without hesitation promptly he answered.

As the discussion looked pointless and unending the Mayoress politely reminded, "Dear, shall we?"

"Oh, yes!" the Mayor looking at his wrist watch said, "I was engrossed in the discussions that I had virtually forgotten where we were sitting. Any way a delightful experience, really delightful!"

He rose to go. The Backbencher also stood up and suggested, "Shall we go to the temple again to offer special prayers?"

"I suppose there is no need as both of us have already offered fervent prayers with all our heart!" the Mayoress smiled: "I want to see whether the Guardian Deity of this town, Bajrangbali will answer our prayers or not!"

"Surely He will!" The Backbencher told very confidently. As they took leave, the Mayor smiling brightly reminded, "I will visit again and at that time we should be able to name this locality after your father!"

"If that is the Mayor's wish, who am I to stop it? But do visit again. Madam, you must also accompany, Mayor sir at that time!" Saying like this the Backbencher followed them up to the car.

As soon as they got into the car, he clasped his hands as a mark of respect and said, "Thank you for the visit!" Reciprocating, the Mayor said, "Thank you for the nice hospitality!" With that the car sped away, the Mayoress gaily waving her hand.

10. BANKER MEETS THE MAYOR

Monday morning,

As soon as the Mayor entered his chamber, the Private Secretary reported, "Sir, there was a telephone call from the Bank Manager. He said he has recently taken over as a Branch Manager on transfer from some up-country branch. He would like to call on you to pay respects. It is purely a courtesy call he said."

"Is he new to this town?" the Mayor eagerly enquired.

"Yes, sir, he said so."

Then let him reach here at half past three," the Mayor suggested. "As soon as he arrives don't usher him here but first take him to the Council Hall and let him have a good look at our Mahatma Gandhi. Let us see whether he would be able to throw some light as he must have seen many places and many people." He meaningfully smiled and the Secretary obediently nodded his head in assent.

The Manager arrived as scheduled dressed up neatly with a broad necktie, followed by a photographer and his assistant carrying a bouquet of flowers and a packet of sweets. The Secretary conveyed the message of the Mayor to have a look at the statue first and accordingly the Manager and his entourage went to the Council Hall. Within the next few minutes, the Manager, duly impressed

returned smiling broadly. Conveying his impression to the Secretary he exclaimed, "What a beautiful statue! Grand and imposing! Deserves to be kept in a temple and worshipped. Really this town should be proud in having produced such a great saint, Shri Shri Mahatma Gandhi!"

The Secretary smiled and led him to the Mayor's chamber. Ushering him announced he, "Sir, the Bank Manager!"

The Mayor raised his head. Smiling very brightly the Bank Manager wished, "Good After-Noon, sir!"

"Welcome," the Mayor wished back. "Welcome and Good After - Noon! "

The Manager took the bouquet of flowers from his assistant and signalled the photographer to come forward. As he presented the bouquet with a broad smile, the photographer clicked with a flash of light and requested, "Sir, one more!"

The Mayor smiled brightly and requested the assistant to come closer so that all the three could be photographed. The photographer took one more snap. Then passing on the packet of sweets the Manager said, "Sir, only sweets! For the members of the family!" With this initial formality, the Manager sat down signalling his assistant and the photographer to take leave. As soon as they had left, the Mayor asked, "Since how long you have been here?"

"Only a fortnight," the Manager answered. "Earlier I was a Manager in some other place. I came here on a transfer that is normal with the post of the Manager. All Managers are transferable once in three years, you see!"

"That means a job in the Bank is nothing but frequent transfers disturbing the family life. Am I right?" the Mayor asked with a smile.

"Of course," the Manager answered. But we don't mind transfers as, at Bank's cost we travel from place to place and study the people and life in different parts of the country. In fact we, the bankers only bring about the so called national integration while all others sitting in fixed places preach about the integration."

"I am happy to hear about that." the Mayor admired: "Now tell me how is your Bank faring here, I mean business?"

"That way I have nothing to complain about. The business is

good. But as bankers our appetite for money is never ending. Day after day, month after month and year after year we are in search of new clientele and new business," the Manager frankly told.

"Well, before we talk further about business, I would like to make a small diversion lest I should forget." The Mayor had something else in his mind and so he changed the subject and asked, "Have you seen the statue in our Council Hall?"

"Yes, sir," the Manager answered enthusiastically. "Really a great work of sculpture. I have also seen the announcement of the reward of Rs.5000/- I am surprised to learn there are no takers for the reward. They say public memory in this country is very short. Otherwise how was it possible that the people forgot such a tall and godly saint Shri Shri Mahatma Gandhi, who had lived, worked and died in this very township itself? Really incredible!"

To the Mayor the Manager's statement looked more amusing than interesting. "Mr. Manager," he elicited, "do you think that the saint hailed from this very place itself?"

"Why not?" the Manager said with an air of solid confidence. "I learn that there is a place called Gandhi Maidan here and this statue of Shri Shri was found there. The statue also bears the same name Gandhi. Who else would name the place other than the citizens of this town and what for should they do? They wanted to perpetuate the memory of their hero and so they got a statue cast in bronze. I can tell with certainty that Shri Shri Mahatma Gandhi lived and died in this very township of ours. No doubt about it!" The Mayor thought of making serious enquiries but before that he thought of clarifying something else. "Mr. Manger, so far no one here has called Mahatma Gandhi adding the title of Shri Shri. How is that you thought of prefixing it?"

"That is a very simple matter, sir!" the Manager lightly said. "In our place we normally add this Shri Shri to anyone whom we consider as a 'sadhu' or a saint worthy of worship. We do show our feelings of respect and reverence this way. I felt that the bronze statue must have been cast when the saint was very old, that too when he was walking with the help of a walking stick of course, not bending his back! So even if he is not alive or even if we do not know anything about him or his son, he deserves our full respect and reverence."

Appreciating his views, the Mayor wanted to continue with the subject. "Well, as to your opinion that he lived here," the Mayor revealed: "Holding the same view, we did verify the census records of this town for the last sixty years. At least somewhere his or his family name should have appeared. There was no Gandhi family living then or now. So he was not a resident of this town."

"The reason for that could have been that the saint might have been a sanyasi without a family and may be living in some temple or in some ashram under the care of somebody else," the Manager felt.

"That may not be true," the Mayor corrected: "He must have been a householder and not a sanyasi. You might have seen the caption, 'Mahatma Gandhi, Father of ...'. Without being a married person how could one become a father?"

"I agree," the Manager appreciated. "So the mystery remains unresolved."

"So also the reward of Rs.5000/-" the Mayor heartily laughed for a while.

Now the Manager declared, "Sir, all said and done, the face is very familiar to me as though I see him everyday and so also the name of Shri Shri 'Mahatma Gandhi.' But I don't remember where it is. Since my Bank is fifty years old in this town, I will ask my assistant to go through all the records of last fifty years and find out whether he was our customer either as a depositor or as a borrower so that my Bank will get the Reward.

The Mayor was happy to hear the words of the Manager volunteering to help. He then expressed, "Thank you for taking interest in the saint. Now tell me, what can I do for you?"

"You can do a lot, sir," the Manager began. "My charter of demands on the Municipality is a lengthy one and I hope you have enough time to listen!"

"Don't you worry, sir!" the Mayor heartily assured, "when your aim is to serve people and mine also the same and when the welfare of the people is our common objective there should not be any constraint of time."

The very positive approach of the Mayor encouraged the Manager to begin: "Sir, our Branch office is here in this town for the last fifty

years. This December, we are going to celebrate the Golden Jubilee in a befitting way. Ours was the first bank to open a branch office here in this township. But to our ill-luck, the Municipality does not have even a five rupee passbook account with us."

The Mayor was surprised. "Is that right?" He asked loudly with his eyes wide open.

"Yes, sir!" the Manager reported. "Like your Municipal census that do not reveal the name of Shri Shri Mahatma Gandhi, our books of accounts also do not reveal the name of the Municipality. It is not the balance or a heap of money but, for us, it is the name that counts."

The Mayor never expected that. He bowed his head pondering over the matter. Something serious must have happened for this lapse, thought he and decided to look into it further. "Don't you worry!" he sincerely assured. "As you know, I never handle finance. Still I will put in a word to the persons concerned. Let me see what best can be done."

"Thank you sir," the Manager felt that he had won the battle. He politely said, "I also learn that you were a Non-Resident Indian. If you have Dollar Deposits, you can patronize in the personal capacity also."

The Mayor was happy over his salesmanship. He had a word of appreciation: "It is my personal experience that all the bankers all over the world work in the same way. They always search for pennies in the purses of others. They never allow people to spend money at all!"

"Thank you for your compliments, sir," the Manager appreciated with a hearty smile. And in the next instant he added, "We give loans also. Housing Finance, Car Finance, Consumers' Durables Credit, Credit Cards etc. for a mere asking. You name it and we shall deliver at your doorstep. Service with a smile!" Declaring so musically, he smiled again meaningfully.

"Good!" the Mayor was all praise for the Manager: "You are a super-sales man. Your Bank should be proud of you."

"That is what I am coming to, sir," the Manager remarked rather hesitated. The main purpose of my visit is..." He looked round to make sure that there was no official around to overhear what they

were discussing. The Mayor sensed and stated that there should not be any cause for anxiety or inhibition.

The Manager opened up his mind: "Sir, I am moving from place to place on transfer after completing my term of three years. Thus I have seen a good number of places. More than eighty percent of our population, especially the rural masses live in abject poverty. That does not mean that the cities are inhabited only by the rich and affluent. Here also there is poverty and unemployment in disguise. For the rural population there is a government sponsored loan scheme called Integrated Rural Development Plan, popularly known as IRDP. In the urban areas there is a similar scheme in operation called Self Employment Plan for the Urban Poor, well known as SEPUP. Through these schemes families with very low income are financially assisted by banks to pursue some vocation to stand on their own under self-employment of their choice. Both the schemes have a non-refundable subsidy granted by the government. In this township there should have been the SEPUP scheme on an ongoing basis..." Having stated like this, the Manager abruptly became silent and looked at the Mayor's face as if seeking permission to continue further.

All the while, the Mayor was listening to him very attentively. As soon as he stopped the narration, he expressed, "Really the schemes seem amazing and interesting. I am happy that some efforts are being made to mitigate the hardships of the poor and the down-trodden."

The Manager now bowed down his head for a while. Then with great hesitation he looked up: "Sir, the pity is, the schemes are really wonderful. But taking them to the deserving people is really a Herculean task. The people who are going to implement must be sincere enough to do it. For example, if I say so, in this township so far no SEPUP loans are granted at all!"

"What do you mean?" the Mayor sharply reacted. "Do you mean to say that the bankers in this township are an irresponsible lot?"

The Manager smiled: "Partly yes and partly no, sir! But we can't hold the bankers solely responsible for this lapse. In fact, the local Municipality is charged with the responsibility of administering the scheme. The welfare department has to identify the eligible

beneficiaries and sponsor to the nearby banks in the locality. I am sorry to bring to your kind notice that our Municipality has yet to wake up to do something." There was pain in his voice.

"Really?" the Mayor mechanically stood up unbelieving. "Incredible, I never knew it!" He confessed and then slowly sat down looking very serious. In the next instant he pressed the calling bell and as soon as the attendant appeared, he ordered, "Call the Chief Officer at once and get me three cups of tea also." Obeying the attendant went out. In a moment's time the Chief Officer came in followed by the attendant carrying a tray with tea. He kept the cups in front of them and withdrew. The Mayor after introducing the Manager to the Chief Officer requested both of them to have tea. As they started drinking, he took his cup. After drinking a little, the Mayor enquired, "I learn there is a scheme called SEPUP which we are supposed to implement and administer."

"Yes, sir," the Chief Officer apologetically said. But we have not been able to launch the scheme so far."

"May I know the reason?" The Mayor was eager to know. The Chief Officer threw a sharp look at the Manager and then almost in a whisper said, "I will convey the reason in confidence sometime later." The Mayor nodded his head in assent. Then changing the subject he pointed out, "This gentle man reports that our Municipality has not patronized the oldest bank in the town."

"Yes, sir," the Chief Officer acknowledged. "I know. But we could not make it up."

"Reason?" the Mayor authoritatively asked.

"Please permit me to convey about this also, in confidence, sometime later." The Chief Officer repeated the same burden of the song. The Mayor felt that there should be some valid reasons, which the Chief Officer did not wish to discuss in the presence of the Bank Manager. So without pressing for immediate answers, the Mayor assured the Manager that he would definitely look into the weak areas and strengthen them before long. The Manager wholeheartedly thanked him and before taking leave he said, "Sir, thank you very much for your kind words of encouragement. Now I seek one more favour from you. As a part of our Golden Jubilee Programme, we are planning to adopt a village called Sarayu Village

on the banks of the River Sarayu, twelve kilometers from this town. I have already surveyed the village and there are fifty families living in abject poverty and misery. We are eager to help the villagers to start their own by availing bank loans. Apart from the drinking water, the village does not have even the basic amenities like electricity, road or a medical centre. We are eager to provide them at least some of the basic amenities with the help of some active social organisations. I invite you to participate as the Chief Guest when we are going to launch the scheme."

The Mayor appreciated the idea wholeheartedly: "I never thought that the banks in this country are dedicated to the cause of the poor also. I shall certainly participate in your inaugural function. But apart from that, please do not hesitate to requisition any other service from our Municipality or from me. Good Luck!"

"Thank you very much, sir," the Manager bowed down his head as a mark of respect. "You are most welcome," the Mayor wished, "All the best to you and your Bank!"

Acknowledging with a bright smile the Manager took leave.

11. RESTAURANT ON ENCROACHED LAND

The Mayor invited the Chief Officer for breakfast the next morning.

The Chief Officer arrived on time. As a gift to the Mayor, he brought with him a basket full of fruits and vegetables. The Mayor humorously remarked, "It appears you have emptied the whole market to bring everything over here."

"Oh, no!" the Chief Officer mildly protested but with a smile. "I rarely buy vegetables in the market. I have my own orchards and gardens, as gardening is my hobby since boyhood days. I grow everything. After all Mother Nature is always kind and bountiful. Throw some seeds on her breast and see for yourself how she would affectionately rear up so that they would produce in hundreds and thousands."

"Yes. Right you are! Nobody can beat Mother Earth in generosity. It is unfortunate that we, her children, do not have in our blood

even a single corpuscle containing that quality. Selfishness and dishonesty, ego and rudeness, jealousy and avarice, what a range of curses we have! Then in our own heart are seated the twins. The devil and the angel! The devil is a big bully whereas the angel a tiny tot!" He meaningfully laughed looking deep into the eyes of the Chief Officer.

The Chief Officer thought over his words and appreciated. "Sir, I never thought that you are so philosophical. You were in America and our belief is that people there are highly materialistic."

"You are right," the Mayor answered: "They are materialistic but they are hard working, too. They are devoted to their duties and dedicated to their nation. If we want to build a strong nation, we have to learn a lot from them."

"But we are always boasting of our cultural heritage and spiritual wealth."

The Mayor wanted to say something but before he could do it, the Mayoress musically announced, "Breakfast ready!"

"We will continue with the discussion over the breakfast. Let us go!" The Mayor led the Chief Officer to the table where food was neatly arranged.

"Please help yourself. Don't hesitate!" The Mayor invited the Chief Officer.

"What about madam?" the Chief Officer politely asked.

"She will join us." The Mayor asked her to join. But knowing fully well why the Chief Officer was invited for the breakfast, she excused herself stating, "I shall join you a little later. There is some work for me in the kitchen."

As they ate, the Mayor began "Now, please tell me all about the bank accounts." The Chief Officer looked slightly upset. He spoke haltingly: "Sir, what can I say? The Senior wants to have a say in everything and forces his decision on everyone."

"What is the link between his decision and the money in the Bank?" The Mayor wanted to know.

"To open a bank account or to place funds under fixed deposits, the council has to authorise. He will not allow you to pass the

resolution unanimously unless you bring in the bank of his choice.

"Fine, but the bank that referred to was the earliest bank. Evidently all our accounts should have been with that bank only."

"You are right, sir! But that bank did not oblige by sanctioning a loan to a person sponsored by the Senior. He got angry and during the next council meeting he saw to it that all the accounts were transferred to another bank where he managed to get the sanction of the loan."

"Tell me, this first bank how was their service to us?"

"Extremely good, sir. On no occasion they failed in giving excellent service to the Municipality."

He said, "Suppose we place some token deposit with the earliest bank as a recognition of their services to the town what would happen?"

"When they are completing fifty years, we must do something. You can impress upon the Council. After all, they are also serving the people over here." The Chief Officer opined.

"But you said, the Senior would oppose."

"Let him oppose, sir! How long should we live in fear and intimidation?"

"Well, now tell me about the loan scheme. Is it in anyway connected with this gentleman, our great Senior?"

"Not this gentleman, sir. But it is his brother-younger brother." The Chief Officer slowly unfolded the truth.

"Younger brother?" The Mayor slightly raised his voice. "Where is he?"

"Sir," the Chief Officer slowly narrated: "As per the Government orders the Welfare Department of all the Municipalities have to initiate steps for the successful implementation of the scheme. Our Welfare Department is in charge of such a person that he does not want to abide by any rules and regulations. He feels whatever he thinks is right, and whatever he speaks should be the law. He believes that everyone including me is working under him."

"Who is this bully?" The Mayor's eagerness knew no bounds. He was really wonderstruck.

"I have already told you, sir, that he is the younger brother of the Senior!"

"That means our Welfare Officer is the younger brother of the Senior."

"Why Welfare Officer, sir?" the Chief Officer meekly declared, "He is virtually all in all. Slightly displease him and you will see for yourself how the elder brother enters to create an ugly scene."

"The elder brother rules the roost in the council meetings and the younger one in the office. Does it mean that we have to watch everything out of helplessness only?"

"For the present, that is the situation prevailing!" The Chief Officer looking worried, confessed: "Who can oppose money power, sir?"

"You mean they are moneyed people?"

"They have strong connections with the state capital. They can go to any extent to get their things done. In fact everyone in the Municipality is terribly afraid of them."

The Mayor fell silent. Gulping down the tea, he kept the empty cup aside. As if trying to find a way out of the woods, he asked, "Now tell me frankly why the Senior did not become a Mayor so far?"

"How can he, sir? Every time he sponsors himself. People oppose. Then there will be a secret ballot as it happened this time. He will lose. Then he will hate everyone."

"But you said he has good links with state capital, how?"

"I have already answered. It is only the money power."

"Tell me, do you think that there is nobody to oppose him, in that case?"

"Not openly, sir, but in every meeting of the council the Backbencher opposes him tooth and nail. You have witnessed it yourself."

"Are they opponents then?" The Mayor asked.

"You can consider so." The shrewd Chief Officer told: "The Backbencher is an upright and honest person. He fights for justice and not for the things he feels right. If the Senior has money power,

this Backbencher has the manpower. Both are equally strong. In the meeting, you can always set one against the other. But the Senior is cunning and dangerous, whereas the Backbencher is good natured and helpful."

The Mayor understood everything clearly. Before concluding he wanted to know: "Do you see any future for our Municipality or should we waste our time in quarrelling over petty things?"

"Sir!" The Chief Officer frankly gave his opinion: "People in the town and in the Municipal office expect miracles from you. They need reforms at a pace faster than at present. I think you can't afford to disappoint people when they have pinned great hopes on you."

"Let me see." The Mayor smiled in conclusion as by then the Mayoress came in and sat down at the dinner table. Wiping her hands with a towel, she poured a little tea in a cup and holding it in her hand, asked as politely as she could, "Dear, did you enquire with the Chief about the proposal for renaming Gandhi Maidan?"

"Sorry, I forgot," the Mayor confessed: "Actually I should have discussed that first. It is an omission on my part."

"No omission, sir," the Chief Officer corrected. "No doubt, it is a hot topic but it deserves to be ignored altogether."

"I was told his father was a great social-worker," the Mayor provoked.

"What sort of social worker!" The Chief Officer scornfully retorted: "Throughout his life, the man ran a pan-beedi shop outside the Municipal fish-market. The shop was an encroachment upon the Municipal land. Still at the instance of both the brothers we regularised levying an annual rent of five rupees. He refused to pay this paltry amount also and died in debt to the Municipality."

"You should have recovered from the sons," the Mayor said.

"Recovery? That is another story, sir," the Chief Officer looked helpless. "Upon his demise, we wanted to take possession of the shop. But the sons successfully brought pressure on us from the State Administration."

"That means the pan-beedi shop still continues!"

"No pan-beedi shop, sir. Not at all! One night, the worthy sons of the worthy father, demolished the shop and constructed a restaurant."

Today we have a restaurant there with a ground rent of barely five rupees."

"I don't think that it is possible to build a restaurant on a small place once occupied by a pan-beedi shop." The Mayor doubted.

"But, sir, the unscrupulous sons outsmarted their father, grabbed some more vacant land belonging to the Municipality and constructed the restaurant!"

"Then did we increase the ground rent at least?" The Mayor wanted to know.

"Who could do it, sir? They are so notorious and dangerous that nobody dares to talk to them." He gave a full account of all that had happened.

"By the way, who is running the restaurant, elder brother or the younger one?"

"They have leased out to somebody else and, I learn, at a very fat rent."

"And the poor and helpless Municipality gets Rs. 5/- as annual rent! Am I right?"

"Yes, sir." The Chief Officer promptly replied: "Five rupees. Only five rupees."

12. LAW OF JUNGLE

At the instance of the Mayor, instead of the usual Meeting Room, the monthly council meeting this time took place in the Council Hall where the statue of Mahatma Gandhi was kept for public view. The seats were arranged in such a way that it was giving an appearance that Mahatma Gandhi was standing there watching minutely the proceedings of the meeting.

The Chief Officer who happened to be Secretary of the Council read out the minutes of the previous meeting and once the minutes were confirmed by the members, the Mayor proceeded with the usual business of taking up one by one the agenda items. The first item that figured in the agenda was patronising the earliest bank that was going to complete fifty years.

The Secretary read out the agenda item and the Mayor said that, it would be in the fitness of things if some fixed deposits were placed with the Bank on the occasion of Golden Jubilee. The Senior, as usual, opposed the idea, stating that the people of the town were not happy with the service rendered by the bank; the staff members were rude and discourteous and the Manager was not helping the people of the locality. The Head Office of the bank was in a far-off place taking many months to give decisions. The people in the bank had the least concern for the customers. They gave cut and soiled notes, which could not be tendered to anybody on the earth in exchange of things and services bought. Passbooks were written so shabbily that none could read or decipher them. "Then, the abnormal delay in cashing cheques and getting the pass-books written, what a shame! We keep our money, the hard earned savings and then suffer at the hands of the bankers! If at all we have an account with this bank it is high time that we close it."

The Mayor listened patiently and then asked, "Now that the bank is in its Golden Jubilee year, should we do something or not?" He invited other members to participate in the discussion.

Instantly, the Backbencher raised his hand and volunteered, "Mayor sir, can I tell something?"

"By all means."

"All that our Senior colleague has told just now," he began, "is nothing but a general complaint against all the banks all over the country. But this bank is rendering really a good service. Otherwise, it should have closed its doors long time ago. I am a regular visitor to this bank and I have a small Savings Account. The service to me is excellent. Of course, I have not gone to the bank with any loan application of mine or anybody else's and so I do not know much about loans. But the overall impression is really good. As for the Manager, I do not know which Manager our big brother is referring to. The present Manager has joined only a fortnight ago. Young and energetic, sincere and dedicated, he deserves all encouragement. After all, our money is kept in our own name. We are not donating anything. On the contrary, we earn interest. If we do not have a flower to give, let us offer at least a petal."

"What is this talk about flower and petal?" The Senior sharply reacted: "I beg to differ with our esteemed friend. Even if I do not

visit, I have authentic reports that the service is exceedingly bad. Therefore, I do not think that this bank merits our patronage. Regarding the Manager, all the Managers on their arrival look mild and docile. Later on, they become rude and arrogant."

The Backbencher stood up and opened his mouth to tell something. But the Mayor, not willing to drag on the discussion further, concluded. "Since there is no other objection, I feel we can place a deposit of Rs.50,000/-"

The Backbencher stood up and said, "Mayor sir, Rs.50,000/-is too small an amount. Please enhance it to five lakhs. Let the figure be a respectable one."

"What are the views of others?" asked the Mayor.

Surprisingly, none including the Senior objected and so it was decided to make a deposit of rupees five lakhs with the bank!

Feeling relieved, the Mayor moved on to the next item on the agenda. The Secretary read out the subject matter and, laughingly, the Mayor explained, "As one time measure, I propose that each one of the councillors in his respective locality can think of naming something after his father. It can be anything, a street, a lane, a by-lane, a maidan or the fish market, flower market or vegetable market, primary school, primary health centre, or the traffic island. But it should be named only after one's father."

The councillors looked at each other in amazement. There was utter silence for a while.

Then, breaking the silence, the Backbencher enquired: "Mayor sir, can you tell us why this strange proposal is made?"

The Mayor's face brightened up: "Let the people know that we are on the job and are doing something. Changing the name is the easiest thing any politician can think of."

"But what is the use?" The Backbencher asked: "After all, we need a name to identity a place. When the existing names serve the purpose, I do not feel there is a need to change. Instead of changing the names of the places, our success lies in changing the outlook of the people, building their character and educating them to become responsible citizens."

"I fully agree with your views," the Mayor answered. "But you

know, sometimes, we have to honour and respect our leaders and our own kith and kin by naming something after them. There is nothing wrong about it. Now, look at this unidentified statue. Somebody got this cast in bronze with a caption that he was somebody's father. Now nobody knows who is the father or who is his son. By the by, the other day I paid a visit to Hanumanji's temple. I observed that the street leading to the temple is nameless. How about our naming it after your father?"

To the Senior the suggestion came as a pleasant surprise. The Mayor must have proposed this in continuation of his discussion with the Principal, felt he. And so he stood up and enthusiastically said, "I second this proposal."

The Backbencher felt irritated and offended. He also stood up and said, "Mayor sir, I dislike this idea of naming something after the fathers of the City Fathers. I not only hate but vehemently protest!" Before he could complete, suddenly, his voice got drowned in the noise of some unexpected shouting of slogans at the entrance of the Municipal building.

The shouting of slogans was not at all expected at that moment of time and the Backbencher at once walked up to the Mayor and whispered in his ears. "Mayor sir, I shall go out and see what the matter is. If required, I shall arrange for police protection to take care of the Municipal property." The Mayor nodded his head and signalled at the Chief Officer to follow the Backbencher. Looking terribly worried, the councillors did not know what to do next. However, an unperturbed Senior stood up and then without looking at anyone, including the Mayor, hurriedly left the place.

Now the shouting became louder and clearer. The slogan shouted was,

*"Change the name, change the name
And change the name of Maidan,
Failing which, failing which,
The Mayor should quit and run!"*

The Backbencher returned after a while followed by the Chief Officer but the Senior had disappeared in the crowd.

The Backbencher went up to the Mayor and reported, "Mayor sir, some 200 students from the college have assembled outside

the Municipal building. Our watch and ward staff have kept the gates closed and so there is no anxiety whatsoever. The demonstrators, outside the closed gates, are carrying placards and banners demanding a change in the name of Gandhi Maidan into that of our Senior's father. Definitely, this must be the handiwork of the Senior and that wretched Principal!"

The Mayor at once remembered the veiled threat the Principal had given that day when he had called on him along with the Senior. But never did he imagine that the doomsday would dawn so soon. Helplessly he sat brooding over the entire episode.

The slogan shouting continued for almost half an hour and as soon as it was over, the Senior walked in, followed by five students and declared, "Mr. Mayor, these youth leaders would like to submit a memorandum."

Pretending as if nothing had happened, the Mayor wore a cheerful look and deliberately said as if it were a compliment, "Well done boys! Tell me, is it a holiday for the college today?" "No, sir!" they politely rejoined, "We have classes."

"That means you have cut your classes and come down here to shout slogans."

"No, sir!" One of them honestly answered: "Our Principal wanted us to do this and we have carried out his instructions."

"I never thought that in our town students are so obedient. Anyway, tell me what do you want?"

"Here is our memorandum, please change the name!" The students submitted. The Mayor at once asked, "There is already a proposal in hand to change the name. Have you brought another proposal?"

"Not the second proposal Mr. Mayor!" The Senior impatiently interrupted: "They are here to support my demand."

"That means you have organised this rally against me." The Mayor looked stern.

"Not I!" The Senior not willing to own the responsibility declared: "It is spontaneous. They have come on their own. I don't know who these boys are!" He faltered: "Really, I don't know!"

The Mayor's eyes shone brightly as though he had caught the culprit: "Boys, be frank. Do you have anything else to say?"

"No, sir!" The students were nervous. They wanted to get away as quickly as possible and so hurriedly they said, "The memorandum gives you everything that we want to tell. All that we demand is the change of name. That's all."

To the Mayor everything looked like a farce. Sarcastically, in everybody's hearing, he said, "I am willing to change the name into that of your Principal's. Please tell him accordingly." He looked at them waiting for their reaction. But the boys kept quiet. At last one of them ventured to ask: "Sir, anything else you want us to convey to our Principal?"

"Yes," the Mayor said with all seriousness: "Youth-power is very precious. Let us use it properly. Misuse will bring in untold misery to the youth only. Please convey this message to your Principal."

Nodding their head, feeling guilty the students left.

Now the Senior occupied his chair feeling uncomfortable and the Mayor, as if nothing had happened, declared: "Now we shall get on with our meeting. The next item on the agenda is to organise implementation of the anti-poverty programme of the Government by launching the SEPUP bank loan scheme in our town. In fact, our Municipality is one among the few that never tried to implement the noble scheme of helping the poorest among the poor. I request our Chief Officer now to give full details of the scheme."

Before the Chief Officer could stand up, the Senior interrupted, "Mr. Mayor, this is not fair. We will not bring in the poor now unless we complete the agenda item two. What has happened to the naming of the street leading to Hanumanji's temple?"

"Mayor sir!" the Backbencher raised his voice: "The street without a name can wait for one hundred years whereas the poor with empty stomachs can't wait even for a day. Let's understand the plight of the poor."

"Poor!" the Senior exclaimed with contempt: "Who is poor in the country? Go to any city and see for yourself how many shopping complexes and multi-storied residential buildings have come up. All our farms have crops and all the sheds have cattle. People pretend

to be poor only to avoid Income Tax!"

The Mayor was stunned. "Then, Honourable Senior member, please tell, what do you want us to do."

"I will protest against every move and action till my demand for change of name is conceded to. Today, you have seen only the beginning of the agitation launched by us. Any moment it may burst and take a violent turn to the detriment of the town. Beware!" He walked out.

The Mayor was in no mood to continue with the meeting. "What a pity! This is how good welfare schemes become non-starters when they fall into the hands of irresponsible people. Politics, thy name is nothing but destruction and destruction!" He deeply sighed.

Then he stood and looked up at the statue of the Mahatma. The smile on the face of the unknown saint looked more meaningful today than ever before as if he had carefully watched the proceedings of the meeting and that he had concluded that nothing in this world would work when the laws of the jungle prevailed.

The Mayor suddenly felt that he should run away from the scene. He left the Council Hall and went to his chamber. There he sat for a while and then, instead of going home, he asked the driver to go to the Gandhi Maidan the lonely place away from the town.

13. VISIT TO GANDHI MAIDAN

When the Mayor reached the Maidan, the sun was already on the last lap of westward journey. The driver took the car up to the spot where the 'Bhoomi Poojan' had taken place a few weeks ago. As soon as the car halted, the Mayor came out and stood there looking round. On one side was looming clearly the town and on the other side in the valleys down the Maidan were gardens, orchards and farms stretching up to the horizon. As he had come to the Maidan without any purpose except to keep himself away from the hustle and bustle of the crooked crowd he thought of spending time till sunset. Yes, it was ages since he had watched either a sunrise or a sunset. The busy schedule all these days had kept him away from enjoying the beautiful side of the life. Therefore now he

thought of sitting down somewhere beneath a tree but nearby there was no tree. As he looked around, he could see at some distance a banyan tree. He asked the driver to wait where the car was parked and then walked down to the tree. After reaching he surveyed going round the tree and then on a big root he sat facing west to watch the sun going down.

It was an evening of bewitching beauty and charm. As the time passed, the sun slowly lost its lustre and also the orange colour and then turned red. But, before long it hid behind a veil of feathery clouds transforming the whole sky into a vast lake of molten gold.

Now from a distance could be seen the herds of cattle returning home and in the evening sky were birds returning to nests chirping gaily as though they had enough to eat during the day that had come to a close. As he was watching the sky that was slowly yielding its place to the advancing night losing its colour and brightness, a sudden thought struck his mind. Where would be Mayor's chamber in the new building going to come up here? Was it going to face east or west? If it were to be east he thought that it should be changed to west so as to enable the Mayor of the town to watch the sunset everyday and forget all the worries and problems and tension associated with the high position of the Mayor. In the next instant, another thought crept in. Why at all the Municipality should construct a new building here and ruin the peace, serenity and beauty of the place? Once the Municipality came here then there would a host of ugly structures like canteen, pan-beedi shops, photo copying machines, typists' windows, telephone booths, litter bins and spittoons that would crowd and ruin the whole area. Instead of shifting the Municipality and defiling an otherwise clean environment, could the existing building not be repaired and renovated with some alterations and additions and also a good face-lift so that this place could continue as it was. What alternative uses this Maidan could be put to without tampering with its environment?

As he was thinking like this another idea came to his mind. When the statue of the Mahatma was found here definitely it meant that the statue must have been installed here on this Maidan itself. A lone statue on an open Maidan, highly impossible! There must have been something else over here. A temple, a Mandir, a memorial.

or? Could we not install the statue again over here? But should it stand alone? Such statues were normally installed in public parks and municipal parks elsewhere. Could we not have a park here so that the Maidan retained everything besides adding colour and beauty to serve as a picnic spot for the citizens of the township and also the school children and others during evenings and holidays as presently there was none here in the town.

The idea of converting the Maidan into a public park gained a firm footing in his mind. But soon there arose a doubt. Who would spend money and take the trouble of converting the bare and bald land into a beautiful park? The Senior would definitely oppose the very idea if the Municipality undertook the job. Yet, the idea could be sold for money. If anyone came forward to beautify the Maidan by way of a park it could be named after a person suggested by the donor. How about my spending the money and naming after my father? The Mayor was stunned at his own thought suggesting to name the park after his father! Naming the public places after one's kith and kin, was this a contagious disease particular to India, which had not spared even him also? First he wondered and then he heartily laughed at himself. Although he was alone, he let lose a peal of laughter, "Ha, Ha, Ha!" Then he said to himself: "They say be a Roman while in Rome and I have literally followed this saying. Now what is the difference between that wretched Senior and myself when I myself am thinking on the same lines as he is doing?"

A ripe fruit of banyan tree dropped on his head and that made him conscious that he was sitting beneath a banyan tree forgetting the world around him. Now he heard somebody call out, "Mayor sir, Mayor sir!" It was a very familiar voice and the Mayor looked back. Yes, it was the Backbencher who had arrived there by his favourite vehicle, the bicycle. Looking at him, the Mayor at once stood up as though he had woken up just now from the slumber in which he was dreaming something unusual! He stood up and enquired eagerly, "How is that you are here, my friend?"

"Mayor sir, I came here searching for you," the Backbencher smiled as if nothing had happened.

"Who told you that I am here?" the Mayor was eager to know: "Nobody knew where I was going to." He looked deep into his

eyes. "Well, I could guess when I saw your car speeding in this direction."

"Fine," the Mayor enquired. "Tell me now, what brought you here." Looking round and making sure that there was nobody else in the vicinity, the Backbencher revealed, "Mayor sir, I wanted to report more about the ugly incident that had taken place in the after-noon. You know all those students who staged the demonstration with slogan shouting? They did not come of their own. Actually they were hired to do this shameful act. I saw the Senior hand over gift packets to each one of them after entertaining them in his Dilkhush Restaurant!"

"I have not given any importance to that demonstration. I have forgotten the whole episode. Even if they do every day I will not be carried away. Till I had reached this place I was sad but as soon as I arrived here I have regained the lost spirits!" The Mayor was very candid and to prove he gave a long whistle by putting two of fingers in his mouth.

The Backbencher respectfully looked at his face and then politely revealed, "Mayor sir, I have come here to seek your permission."

"Permission, for what?"

"If you say, 'yes' today, the day after tomorrow, I would like to organize a rally of five hundred people to oppose the move of changing the name of this Maidan. The name Gandhi Maidan should remain for ever and nothing else!" He opened up his mind. The Mayor was dumbfounded. "What these people are up to?" thought he. "If this gentleman takes out a rally of five hundred people the next day that crook will bring in one thousand. Then there will be head on collision, clashes and violence. And what for? To give this empty space another name! That too to satisfy somebody's ego without any benefit to anyone except some painters and carpenters to work on the changed name!"

As he was thinking like this, the Backbencher amplified, "Mayor sir, you may feel that I am on the war path. But somewhere we have to stop that fellow advancing with his unreasonable demands and motives. If we succumb, the people in the town may laugh at us. Do you know what was his father?"

"Yes, of course," the Mayor deliberately quipped, "a great social worker of this town."

The Backbencher instantly covered both of his ears not willing to hear and pleaded, "Mayor sir, please, please, do not call that anti-social element as a social worker. Let us not resurrect a sinner as a saint, especially when he had grabbed the public property. You know, he had encroached upon the Municipal land near the fish-market and never paid even five rupees ground rent. Disgraceful! Lie upon him and members of his family!"

"Then tell me what do you think of this Mahatma Gandhi? Be frank!" the Mayor asked.

The Backbencher opened up his mind: "What should I think of that great soul?" After joining his palms in salutation, he continued: "Unknown, yet great! You did a rare honour to the saint in holding the meeting today at his feet. The old man is a symbol of great many ideas and ideals and virtues if we properly interpret. He is in a walking posture to indicate that one must not remain idle and static but be constantly on the move. His bewitching smile indicates that we must love everybody and be friendly to all. The loincloth and shawl covering only half of his body indicate that we must lead a simple life. The timepiece hanging on the left-hand side of his body tells that we must not waste our time, as time is the most precious thing on this earth."

The Mayor was very happy: "You have accurately interpreted the posture and the appearance but you have not told about the walking stick he is holding." The Mayor reminded. "Mayor sir!" the Backbencher was frank. I think he is holding it because he is old. He needs a support while walking!" "Definitely yes!" the Mayor said: "But to me it is something more than a mere walking stick. He is holding it not only to get support but also to ward off any danger or evil force approaching. More than that to me it seems a symbol of authority like the sceptre held by the monarchs of the ancient times. This Mahatma may not have been an ordinary mortal. He might have been wielding a great moral authority on the masses. In fact more than the stick, I am greatly impressed by his message of 'Truth, Non-violence and Love.' We should literally follow this message. Tell me honestly what do you think of the war against poverty, illiteracy and disease. I think everybody in public life should

be a warrior and according to the Mahatma we must combat these age-old curses plaguing the mankind. To be frank with you, at the end of the meeting today, I wanted to call upon the councillors to take an oath to follow this message of war of the Mahatma but to my ill luck something else happened. We made a mockery of the Mahatma's teachings although we held the meeting at his very feet. He was very sad.

"Yes, I could follow your feelings, Mayor sir," while the Backbencher was telling like this, the Mayor could observe pain in his voice also. The Backbencher continued: "Sages and seers how many of them were born in India to show the right track of living and leading a righteous path. But alas, nothing works here! My Lord Bajrangbali when you had crushed so many cruel demons in the past, why are you standing still without acting as though you too are tired of every thing. If you don't act whom should we approach to bring an end to these atrocities?"

Hearing the name of Hanuman, the Mayor at once asked, "Tell me this Senior-fellow is he visiting your Hanumanji temple or not?"

"To my knowledge he is not. He believes that Hanumanji is a servant of Lord Rama and is an ordinary monkey. Once he has also expressed that he respects only the Master and not the Servant, in day to day life in other places also!"

"That means he visits Lord Rama's temple, I suppose!" The Mayor expressed.

"He visits none!" the Backbencher scornfully replied: "He worships only money and nothing else. Shame to him and his wealth amassed resorting to foul means!"

The sun had already set and it was getting darker. Looking at the horizon, the Backbencher reminded: "Mayor sir, you have not granted me the permission to hold the rally to oppose the change in the name of Gandhi Maidan. I came here to seek your permission but you kept on changing the tracks leading me nowhere!"

The Mayor laughed it off. "I am reminded of a tale of somebody who, after carefully hearing the story of Rama in Ramayana throughout the night, asked at the daybreak, 'Tell me clearly what exactly is the relationship between this Rama and that so called

ita. Was she his mother, sister, daughter or wife? The story did not mention clearly the relationship! Like that particular story, after discussing thoroughly about the merits of the Mahatma's Non-violence, Truth and Love all and Hate none and also not to waste precious time in petty matters that could very well be utilized in fighting war against Poverty, Illiteracy and Disease as our goals in life, should we now go back and surrender to our savage instincts to take a revenge, that too on that wretched fellow the Senior? When he doesn't deserve the gift of even an old pair of shoes, why should you give him importance by organizing a protest rally? I will not suggest a tit for tat. Let us face everything calmly and bravely as it comes. So far as I am concerned, I am everybody's Mayor, those who have voted for me and those who have not. I will not bear any ill will, nor will I provoke or instigate anyone to destroy or damage any public property that belongs to every one of us and all of us. My aim is very clear: Bend something but do not break it!"

By then the moon started shining. "Shall we?" the Mayor asked. The Backbencher heartily accepted: "I must thank you because you have opened up my eyes. All the while I was thinking of taking revenge but you have changed my heart. I am really grateful to you." Then they left the banyan tree and while walking towards the car, the Mayor unfolded his plan of converting the Maidan into a park with the statue of the Mahatma at the centre, to spread symbolically his messages with more accent on non-violence. In the fitness of things he felt that there should have been somebody in the town capable of telling at least something about the Mahatma, his wonderful life if any and his teachings. "That would have strengthened our hands in our fight for retaining his name to this place!"

In conclusion, the Mayor felt that he was helpless on all counts.

14. HAPPY HEART RESTAURANT

A fortnight passed off peacefully without any trouble. Everyday the Mayor thought that something or other would happen but nothing untoward took place.

On the sixteenth day, instead of going to the Municipal Office

directly, he asked the driver to go to the Municipal Fish Market so that he could see for himself the market and also the restaurant constructed unauthorisedly on the Municipal land. He asked the driver to park the car slightly away from the market to avoid public gaze.

It was eleven o'clock in the morning and so the fish market, after finishing the morning session, was looking deserted with only a few people here and there. Still the Mayor, without anybody noticing him, went round.

It was an old building and there was no proper drainage. The walls devoid of colour and shade were looking dull and drab and from the ceiling were dangling, with a coating of dust, the naked electric bulbs with cobwebs around them. Though burning, they shed a dim light as if tired of a stinking atmosphere round the day.

There were a handful of vendors but they were seen packing off counting the notes and coins, the money earned out of the sale of fish.

There were stray cats and dogs feeding themselves on the thrown away pieces of the fish and from a nearby tree could be heard the noisy crowing of the hungry crows eagerly waiting for their share of the spoils. The floor with moisture still visible was slippery and the whole area was damp and stinking with the smell of fish.

The Mayor held his handkerchief close to his nose and, walking very carefully on the slippery floor, finished the visit. As he was coming out of the main entrance suddenly his eyes caught sight of a signboard reading "Dilkhush Restaurant" not far away from the market. Was there any other hotel here? He looked round and there was none. "This must be the restaurant that was built by our villain. 'Dilkhush Restaurant'- really a good name! Very good, indeed! If translated into English, it would read, " Happy Heart Restaurant!" He smiled at the very name and thought, "If the land is available free, why the heart cannot be swollen with happiness?" Soon without his knowledge, his legs dragged him to the restaurant. As soon as he reached, there was some unknown urge in him to enter and so he eagerly went in.

The hall was packed with people and there was no vacant chair. A waiter came up to him and requested, "Sir, in that corner, there is

a special room. You can go there." The Mayor did as directed. As soon as he sat down, the same waiter came in and enquired, "What would you like to have?"

"A cup of tea."

"No snacks?"

"No, thank you!"

The tea came and the bill too. The Mayor sipped only a little. He called the waiter, gave him a ten-rupee note and asked him to keep the balance amount for himself as a tip. The waiter looked at him gratefully. The Mayor then came out of the so-called special room, which was furnished, slightly better than the hall where the tables and chairs were looking rickety and old.

He came out of the restaurant and while walking towards the place where his car was parked, a car came and stopped just in front of the hotel. The driver of that car instantly opened the door on his side and hurriedly got down to open the other door to enable his master to come out. The Mayor waited near his car to see who the master was.

From the car emerged the Welfare Officer, the younger brother of the Senior! The Welfare Officer, never expecting the Mayor or any other dignitary, entered the restaurant with an air of supreme confidence.

The Mayor marked the time. It was half past eleven whereas the Municipal Office commenced working at half past ten.

The Mayor reached the office and summoned the Chief Officer.

The Chief Officer came in and wished, "Good Morning, sir!"

"Good Morning!" the Mayor mechanically mumbled rather agitated. Then he asked, "Though the Mayor is not supposed to look into the internal matters of administration, tell me frankly, do all our members of the staff report for duty on time?"

The Chief Officer's face fell. He looked pale and bowed his head. In the next instant, he gained courage and said, "Sorry sir, I must confess that people are not at all punctual."

"Why?" the Mayor raised his voice. "Why can't they be punctual when all of them are residing in this town and are not required to

travel over long distances?"

The Chief Officer again bowed his head. The Mayor pressed the calling bell. Attendant appeared. "Call the private secretary." The secretary came in. The Mayor asked: "Get me the Attendance Register of the Welfare Department."

"Yes, sir!" The secretary went out and within no time returned with the register. The Mayor then asked, "Mr. Chief Officer, can you verify the register and tell me whether or not the Welfare Officer is on duty today?"

The Chief Officer did not open the register. He simply touched and said, "Excuse me, sir! There is no need to verify."

"Why?" The Mayor became curious.

"The Welfare Officer reports on time." He clarified: "He arrives sharp at ten-thirty, signs the muster and then orders for a cup of tea. As soon as the tea comes, he drinks and then orders for a 'pan.' Once the pan is brought he slowly chews and then leaves the office for the day!"

"That means he comes to the office only to sign the Attendance Register but not to work. Am I right?" The Mayor shouted at the pitch of his voice, being unable to control his anger.

"We can assume that way, sir!" The Chief Officer confessed again: "This has been going on for years now."

"Do we pay salaries to the people only for marking the attendance?" The Mayor said sarcastically. "Why should he come to the office at all? Why can't we remit his salary every month to his home by way of a Money Order and save him of the botheration of collecting salary personally?"

"How can we do it, sir?" the Chief Officer innocently asked. "For all practical purposes the Attendance Register is an official record to suggest that he was in the office attending to his duties during office hours. Therefore one has to sign. Without signature we cannot pay salary."

"I don't deny!" The Mayor slowly calmed down: "But tell me, how can we pay salary to a person who does not work at all! How many such officials do we have?"

"We have five such officials, sir." The Chief Officer revealed: "All of them are trade union leaders."

"Union leaders?" The Mayor was surprised: "Why can't the Union leaders attend to their official duties? What prevents them from working? I learn even the Prime Minister of the country works for eighteen hours a day. The leaders must lead the people by setting a good example. Tell me, how a country like ours can come up if people do not work."

"Sir, it is a fact that the trade union leaders sign the Attendance Register and do not work in the office. Throughout the day they are in the union office attending to the grievances and needs of the employees. Their major concern is the welfare of the employees whereas in the case of our Welfare Officer, he goes out not for anybody's welfare except his own."

"But how can that be permitted? "The Mayor authoritatively asked banging the table with his first.

"Nobody has permitted this, sir!" The Chief Officer meekly replied: "I have already brought to your notice that he and his brother both are bullies and all that they do is to intimidate people around, making use of the people in the authority and power."

"But why should the people in authority oblige them?"

"It is simple, sir! Perhaps, they must be helping the people to acquire the authority through the ballot box and once they acquire, they must be repaying the debt in this way."

"Tell me frankly, under what obligation you people have to permit this Welfare Officer to leave the office after signing the Attendance Register. Please tell me the truth."

The Chief Officer replied: "Sir, at least, I am not under the obligation of anybody. There are seven deputy Chief Officers working under my control. Each deputy is looking after several departments and one of them is the Welfare Department. The Welfare Officer is in charge of that department. It is therefore the duty and responsibility of the deputy to discipline him. But as reported personally that day when I called at your residence, somehow people are afraid of these bullies."

"Why the people should be afraid of? What for?" The Mayor was highly critical.

"We, the people in service, are not free to act according to our will. There is a rulebook that we are supposed to follow literally and meticulously. We are accountable for any act of omission or commission. If not accountability, then the displeasure of our superiors culminating in punishment by way of transfers. A transfer within the city may not bring in much discomfort but outside to a distant place is always painful, making us lose the connections and established friendship, uprooting the family bringing in inconvenience and trouble of transportation of everything lock, stock and barrel." He looked greatly worried.

"But the job in the Municipality is not transferable, I believe. Recruitment takes place from among the local candidates. Am I right?" The Mayor asked.

"Yes, sir!" The Chief Officer nodded his head: "But a few of us, the Chief Officer and the Deputy Chief Officers, are liable for transfer. Our services are lent by the State Government."

"Then, what you people are afraid of?" With his eyes wide open, the Mayor asked wondering. But the Chief Officer had this to say in clarification: "The crux of the problem lies there only, sir! Even on the slightest provocation, the councillors or the Mayor can get anyone of us transferred anywhere in the state. As I have just now told, a transfer is the worst form of punishment especially if one has school-going children."

The Mayor pondered over the matter for a while and then said, "That means you people are always under the threat of a transfer, I suppose."

"You are right, sir!" The Chief Officer admitted: "Generally it is so but I don't belong to that category, sir. I am willing to go to the jail even if it is in the interest of people I serve. But all are not like me, sir!"

"Fine!" The Mayor appreciated, "Then tell me how do we solve this problem?"

"Which problem are you referring to, sir?"

"Well, let me come directly to the point. I paid a visit to the Municipal Fish Market and also the 'Dilkhush Restaurant' nearby. I saw the Welfare Officer getting down from the car at around 11.30 A.M. When our office starts at 10.30 A.M. how could he be there? I

ist wanted to know whether he was on duty or on leave. Now, I have come to know that he marks the attendance and immediately leaves the office. I also learn that he looks after his own welfare and not that of the people of the town. For the same reason, I must conclude that he finds little time to implement even the Government sponsored Welfare Schemes. Even to discipline him we do not have the required courage. This being the case, I wonder for whose benefit we are running the Municipality."

The Chief Officer remained speechless for a while. The Mayor was right. The reality was before him. Could he not impose a strict discipline on the people working down the line? Could he not educate a petty official only because he happened to be a brother of a councillor? If he was incorrigible, then could he not change his duties or relieve him of all the official duties and entrust the department to somebody else who was capable of delivering the goods?

As he was pondering over the matter in this way, the Mayor thought that the Chief Officer was unable to find a solution and so he suggested, "I can understand your predicament. All that I want to impress on you is that the future of the welfare schemes must not depend on a single person. Tell me, can I constitute a committee of councillors for monitoring the implementation of the anti-poverty programmes? Our Backbencher could be the convener of the committee with two other like-minded councillors to assist him."

"We can try that, sir!" The Chief Officer had a doubt: "But I don't know whether he is in a mood to accept this assignment."

"Why?" The Mayor asked eagerly: "What is the problem?"

"It is a tragedy, sir," continuing, the Chief Officer reported, "that our small town should witness this sort of dirty politics. You know the Backbencher happened to be one of the trustees of Hanumanji temple. All these years, the election of trustees was taking place unanimously without any contest. But this time it took place in such a way that it was looking almost like a general election."

"I never knew it!" The Mayor expressed his surprise: "In fact, the Backbencher had never disclosed that he was a trustee of the temple!"

"After all it was an election for the posts of trustees of the temple where God is supreme and the trustees are supposed to be His

servants. Well, the election took place and our Backbencher has lost!"

"What? Then, who has won?"

"Some persons who were hitherto unknown to us have won, with one exception, that is our Senior. He has been elected one of the trustees!"

"Really?" It was news to the Mayor.

The Chief Officer also stood up and stated, "Yes, sir! That is the most interesting aspect of this election. The Senior never visits the temple. People say that money must have flowed like water, with the sole objective of crushing the Backbencher!"

"What a pity!" The Mayor felt sorry for the Backbencher. "This should not have happened to an ardent devotee of Hanumanji. A temple should not have become a toy in the hands of politicians to play with. Really, it is not good for the town. Not at all good!"

Stating like this, he sat down as though he had lost suddenly all his strength, stamina and courage to face the world boldly.

15. THE LOST ELECTION

That evening, before going home, the Mayor thought of paying a visit to the Hanuman Temple and thereafter to the residence of the Backbencher.

Accordingly, he reached the temple. There were no crowds as it was a weekday and so the entry into the temple was not difficult. He entered the temple, offered silent prayers closing his eyes for a while went round and put rupee coins in the plate kept in front of the idol. During his previous visit, as there was a crowd, in a hurry, he had to be content with a fleeting glance, but today without flowers and garlands the bare idol presented a different but full view. A mere look suggested that it was not an ordinary idol of Hanuman in the usual posture. On the contrary, He was looking grim showing His teeth as though He was furious and was in his terrible form. He was depicted here as a warrior marching on to the battlefield of Lanka carrying on His shoulders the all-powerful mace.

Then His tail was upraised as though to exhibit that He was ready to attack and His raised left-hand indicated that He wanted to stop all alone an advancing army. Like this, Hanumanji was looking all-powerful and awe-inspiring.

The Mayor was glad that he was able to observe minutely every detail of the Guardian Deity. Claspings his hands again, he turned back. The visit over, he came out of the temple and walked down the lane where the Backbencher lived. He went straight to his house and pressed the calling bell. Before somebody could come and open the door he heard from behind, "Mayor sir, Good Evening." It was the Backbencher who had wished him.

The Backbencher came forward and called out loudly the name of his wife and ordered, "Open the door!" She came out from the kitchen, opened the door and smiling brightly said, "Welcome, sir. Please come in."

The Backbencher apologetically said, "I was not aware that you would be visiting the temple to-day. I was busy in the shop. Your driver reported that you are here. Therefore I rushed in."

"In fact, I should have informed you before starting," the Mayor politely replied. "But this is not a scheduled visit. Since morning, I had a strange urge in me to meet you. I was unable to overcome it. Therefore, I am here."

The Backbencher led the Mayor in and as he sat down he began, "Mayor sir, they call it something like telepathy. In fact since morning, my heart, too, was yearning for a meeting with you. You know that day, when we met at Gandhi Maidan, I had the same feeling. Perhaps, our hearts throb in one and the same rhythm."

"Right you are!" The Mayor appreciated his sentiments: "I always derive a lot of consolation when I talk to you. May be in one of the past lives we were intimate friends."

"Why do you wish to take the friendship back to some unknown period, when we have become friends in this life itself, at the very first sight?"

"You told me that you have come from your shop. Tell me what business you are in."

"Grocery. We are in this business from my grandfather's days.

He and my father, both ran the business which I have inherited”.

“Good! Then, are you going to pass on this to your son too?”

“Of course, so long as it pays, let the family business continue. After all, one must have some vocation to earn honestly his daily bread. I believe in the income earned by hard work. In business, too, I believe that one must think of only reasonable profit and not easy money by way of profiteering. After all, we have business and profits only if the customers come. If they don't patronise, we may have to close down the shop. This is my working principle.”

The Mayor nodded his head in assent and appreciated, “I am really happy to hear that. In every sphere, there is a scope for social service. One need not necessarily join a service club to serve the community.”

“Also there is no need to hold the post of a trustee in a temple.” The Backbencher poured out his feelings, winked his eyes and laughed heartily knowing fully well the purpose of the Mayor's visit. He continued, “ Mayor sir, I am happy that Hanumanji got me relieved of the trusteeship of the temple. In the name of God, atrocities take place. In fact, in the monthly meetings, I had to oppose each and every unfair move. The trustees often say that at law God is a minor and the trustees the guardians. On the earth, in the eyes of man-made law, it may hold good. But what about the celestial law in the heavenly court? What answer can I give to that Judge of judges? With what face can I defend myself if I misuse my official position? Really, it is a great relief as all the while I was feeling that I was like Vibheeshana in the royal court of the elder brother, Ravana where the imprisoned Hanuman was produced before the demon king. One or the other episode in Ramayana or Mahabharata occurs everyday and in every sphere of our life.”

“That means you have accepted the defeat cheerfully,” the Mayor interrupted.

“Mayor sir, please do not carry the impression that the grapes are sour to me now. I took the trusteeship as an opportunity to serve the Guardian Deity of the town. I thought it came to me as a decree from Hanumanji Himself. When I was not elected again, I deemed it as His decree only. Without being a trustee, can I not serve as a devotee?”

"I learn, our Senior got elected as a trustee." The Mayor now introduced the subject that was uppermost in his mind.

The Backbencher calmly answered: "Mayor sir, Indian philosophy says all that happens on this earth, even the batting of the eyelids, takes place only at the command of God. Hanumanji must have felt that I must go out and he must come in. Otherwise, how do you explain a person, who had never visited this temple even once so far as I know, think of contesting for the post of a trustee?"

"Do you think, the Senior wanted to humiliate by defeating you?" The Mayor frankly asked.

"Whatever be the reason, the temple is going to be benefitted out of his induction as a trustee. Everyone knows that he is a moneyed man. The temple needs urgent repairs and renovation. In such a situation only he can afford to spend from his pocket whereas I cannot. Sometimes God gets the things done in this way."

The Mayor somehow was not convinced by the explanation. He said: "Whatever, you might say or feel, to me it appears that in this country people especially the political parties have set their eyes on the religious places of worship only to draw attention of the people as everyone here is a believer. Faith takes people on its wings to travel beyond the realm of reality."

"Without that we cannot live on this earth full of ordeals, Mayor sir!" The Backbencher stopped the discussion for a while as by then his wife had come in with two glasses of limejuice with some sweets.

The Backbencher, receiving the tray from his wife, offered it to the Mayor who promptly took a sweet and also one glass of juice.

After eating the sweets, the Backbencher, as if refreshed, said, "Mayor sir, that day you stopped me from organising a rally to oppose renaming the Gandhi Maidan. At that moment of time I had agreed, but now I feel, I must revive the whole idea."

"Why?" The Mayor was astounded at the sudden change of the subject.

"I knew the motives of that wretched Senior." He bit his lips and said as scornfully as possible. "If he believes that we are too soft he would go to any extent or stoop low to any depth. I think it is high time that we check him whatever be the cost."

"Do you believe," the Mayor asked, "that he will now spend his time and energy on the renaming issue rather than improving the temple that has come straight into his hands."

"Mayor sir, soon after his election as a trustee he handed over a cheque of Rs.50,000/- to the temple to be spent on urgent repairs. What a big show it was! After that he assured the trustees of further help including a donation from Municipality also. Now it is for other trustees to carry out the work of renovation." Then suddenly changing the topic, much to the surprise of the Mayor, he said, "I may tender resignation even to the position of Municipal Councillor."

"Why this change of heart? Are you really tired of social and public service also?"

"Mayor sir, to be frank with you, now I have realised that I am not suited to hold any position in public life as I feel like revolting openly against selfishness, injustice and dishonesty. Instead of understanding properly, all people tend to misunderstand me. At times I feel why should I alone, fight for justice while others knowing full well keep mum over everything."

The Mayor smiled meaningfully: "Basically you are a business man and you know how to sell your wares. Similarly, you must also know how to sell your ideas. Picking up a quarrel at every word will only spoil a case that is otherwise a good and a constructive one. After all, all of us aim at serving people better and better."

The Backbencher took the advice in right earnest. Yet he had this to say: "But, Mayor sir, you know very well what is happening in our meetings also. I have to fight the Senior while all others watch it like a great fun. Where is the scope for selling the idea there?"

The Mayor, suddenly remembering the purpose of his visit, asked, "Do you know what prompted me to come down here?"

"No," the Backbencher replied.

The Mayor said: "Somehow, I want to launch the anti-poverty Governmental scheme through our Municipality. Unfortunately, our Welfare Section is not active. I want to constitute a committee to implement the scheme on a large scale. Can you head that committee?"

"Me?" The Backbencher could not conceal his astonishment.

The Mayor explained, "The job is not an easy one. The scheme is meant for the poorest of the poor who have to be properly identified. Otherwise, the financial assistance will go to wrong persons. Then there is non-refundable Government subsidy that need not be repaid at all. Here again, people may misuse the scheme and pocket the subsidy. Therefore, it is imperative that the officials who administer the scheme should be honest to the core. I feel you are the most suitable person for the job."

The Mayor then continued: "I know that you are hesitating. But let me tell you that you will see for yourself how rewarding the job will be, as you will earn the gratitude of hundreds of poor families struggling hard to come up in life. I am quite certain that Hanumanji has relieved you from the trusteeship in order to provide you with enough time to serve the masses. Believe me!"

"Mayor sir," the Backbencher joining his palms, said, "I deem it a rare honour. The very fact that the Mayor of the town has come down to knock at my door to make an offer indicates that Hanumanji has certainly inspired you to entrust this task to me. I will serve the poor and the needy honestly and make the scheme a grand success! You will see this for yourself."

As if to say, "May that be so!" the temple bells started ringing loudly for 'aarti'. Both of them stood up and devoutly clasped their hands in salutation to Hanuman who was standing in that town as the Guardian Deity with a mace in hand as though ready to crush and blast the evil forces!

16. THE OLD MUNICIPAL BUILDING

The next day, the Mayor got down before the main gate and asked the driver to take the car to the parking shed, as he would like to walk down. As soon as the car moved away, he stood at the edge of the road and had a good look at the Municipal building.

It was an old building, a century old, but it presented a majestic look. With its 'U' shape, on the left hand side of the visitor from the main gate was the Mayor's chamber and on the right hand side, the Chief Officer's secretariat. In the middle was the Council Hall where

meetings took place. On the entire first floor were various departments. It had a tiled roof but in the centre there was a balcony with a mast from the top of which was fluttering the tricolour from sunrise to sunset. In front of the building there was a garden with bushes and plants and in the centre was a fountain, which seemed to have stopped playing long time ago.

He walked down to the dry fountain standing in the middle of a walled circle and stood watching. There were some carvings in marble and it was not difficult to know what they were. There was a big lotus in full bloom in the centre, surrounded by buds, neatly arranged. Beneath were the leaves carved out of marble. He went round the circle and then paced up and down in the garden touching and examining each and every bush, plant and creeper. It was a garden, yes, but an untended one. The plants had grown haphazardly as if in a forest.

After going round the garden, the Mayor thought of paying a visit to the Chief Officer's secretariat.

His visit brought a pleasant surprise to the Chief Officer. He stood up hurriedly and greeted, "Good Morning, sir. Welcome to my office."

"Good Morning," The Mayor said and looked round: rickety chairs and old tables for the officials and broken benches for the visitors. The walls had faded and the window curtains full of dust and dirt had lost their colour long ago. As the Mayor observed everything minutely with his searching eyes, the Chief Officer got panicky. But when the Mayor smiled, he regained his lost confidence. In a low tone, he said, "It is for the first time in my 25 years career that a Mayor has visited my chamber."

The Mayor nodded and then remarked. "That's why things look so shabby here."

"For that there is a good reason," the Chief Officer said apologetically. "But please do not take it to be an excuse, sir."

"Never!" The Mayor heartily laughed: "Centuries ago that great scientist, Newton, had declared. 'For every action there is a reaction and for every action there is a reason!' Therefore, I believe that there should be some solid reason for all this mess. You can tell me now what exactly is the reason." The Chief Officer got emboldened. He cleared his throat and said, "Sir, for the last three years we have

not been carrying out any work of repair and maintenance hoping that we would be shifting early to a new building with new furniture and fittings. Why spend money on old things when we are going in for new ones, so we thought."

The Mayor saw reason in his explanation. He lowered his head, pondered for a while and then asked: "Even if we assume that we are going to shift, can we not keep things clean? The office should look like an office, as hundreds of visitors come to the Municipal office everyday. I can't expect efficiency if all our departments are not kept clean."

The Chief Officer understood the intensity of the feelings of his boss. He hastened to assure him: "Sir, give me a month's time. Only one month and then see, how this entire Municipal office will look. All that I need to carry out, is a small budget, a very small one, sir."

The Mayor smiled and said: "Charity begins at home. Within a week's time I will change everything in this chamber first. Let this look exactly like the Mayor's Chamber—well furnished—elegant and beautiful. Throw everything out! Once you furnish this, then the cabins of your deputies and thereafter, all the other departments."

After a moment's pause the Mayor said, "I'll give you one more assignment. The garden in front of the building does not look like a garden. It should be given a good shape. The plants look as if they are growing in a jungle. The fountain in the centre needs repairs and thereafter painting. Let the lotus in the middle have a coating of crimson and the leaves, dark green. The buds too must have crimson."

The Chief Officer nodded his head in assent. However, he had a doubt: "Sir, what about the budget?"

"So, far as the garden is concerned, if there are no funds, I shall personally bear all the expenses. As to others, since you have not spent anything during the last three years on repairs and maintenance, I shall take the council into confidence and get the expenditure approved. But see that we do not spend extravagantly. Bare minimum things and bare minimum expenditure."

"Yes, sir," the Chief Officer responded happily.

"Then, shall we have a quick visit to all the departments in the first floor?" The Mayor asked and the Chief Officer at once agreed.

They climbed up the old staircase, with wooden steps screeching at every step!

17. AT HANUMANJI'S CALL

All the departments were housed on the first floor with low partitions to demarcate the different sections and groups. Here also the faded walls had developed cracks here and there. The window curtains full of dust and dirt were looking centuries old. Every shelf and every cub-board was overloaded with files and papers and the employees were looking as though they were struggling hard to come out of the jungle of papers and papers. The old ceiling fans were whirring lazily and the electric lights were looking dim as though they were burning half-heartedly.

The flag-mast was standing on a pedestal and just in front of it, facing the road was a marble statue of about two feet height on a pedestal of the equal height. The Mayor followed by the Chief walked towards the statue and stood before it. The statue looked familiar. Bald headed old man wearing the loincloth and shawl covering the shoulders. His eyes were closed and the face was looking calm, composed and serene to suggest that he was in deep meditation. He was in a sitting posture.

The Mayor gazed and gazed silently. Mechanically he clasped his hands and closed his eyes for a while as a mark of respect.

"Can you not recognise?" The Mayor asked with a bright smile.

"Yes! I can." A surprised Chief Officer nodded his head confidently. "I never dreamt that there could be a statue of Mahatma Gandhi here also. In fact, year after year, we have been coming to this balcony for flag hoisting on Independence Day and Republic Day but none of us took enough care to see what this statue is! Incredible!"

The Mayor laughed: "Now it is clear that Mahatma Gandhi the saint, had close links with this place. Otherwise, his statue should not have been here in the Municipal building. By the by, can you tell me, what was the name of the first Mayor?"

"Not Mahatma Gandhi, sir!" promptly replied the Chief Officer.

“Was there any Prime Minister or President of India by the name Mahatma Gandhi?” Eagerly the Mayor enquired.

“We have the official list. Nowhere Mahatma Gandhi is figuring out, sir!”

“That means Mahatma Gandhi is the name a statue born out of the imagination of a sculptor. Can I conclude in this way and forget about the statue?” The Mayor asked.

“Sir, it may not be proper on our part to jump to conclusion in this way that too when two statues are found in the same town.” He walked forward and examined minutely the pedestal to see whether there was anything inscribed. No, there was no caption. Everything was blank and there was no trace of any writing at all.

The Mayor heaved a heavy sigh. To him everything seemed more and more mysterious. He stood there speechless. The sun was climbing up the sky and as it was nearing the zenith, the Chief Officer reminded, “Sir, it is getting very hot here. Shall we return?”

Yes!” the Mayor said in all seriousness. “We shall now go to my chamber. I have something important to discuss.” He wanted to tell the Chief Officer about the meeting he had with the Backbencher the previous evening.

As they were nearing the chamber, they saw the Welfare Officer waiting. He was carrying in his left hand a small packet wrapped in colour paper. He greeted them both.

“Mayor sir,” the Welfare Officer, bowing his head as a mark of respect, said, “May I have a word with you?”

“By all means. Let’s get in.”

After entering, the Mayor offered him a seat. Not willing to sit, he said, “Sir, I will not sit. I will take only one minute of your precious time.”

“Why one minute? You take your own time. I am not in a hurry.”

Nodding his head, the Welfare Officer dramatically opened the box he was holding. Then proffering, he said: “Mayor sir, this is the ‘prasad’ for you from our Hanumanji’s Mandir. You know Hanumanji is the Guardian Deity and yesterday my elder brother had offered a special pooja to Bajrangbali for the welfare of the town. This is the ‘prasad’ of that pooja. Incidentally my brother has become one of

the trustees of the temple." He looked happy. The Mayor took a little, ate and then said, "Hearty Congratulations! By the by, where is your elder brother? He should have distributed the sweets."

"He will certainly do it, sir. He may even host a banquet." He paused for a while and proudly declared, "It is a great achievement, sir. He is likely to become the Managing Trustee of the Temple."

"Really?" the Mayor was surprised. Then he said, "I think this is the stepping stone to seek a seat in the State Assembly or Central Parliament."

"You are right, sir," the Welfare Officer agreed: "But you know charity begins at home."

"Good!" The Mayor concluded.

"Now, Mayor sir, I have something personal to talk to you."

"Don't hesitate!" The Mayor encouraged forgetting everything.

"I came to know," he apologetically said, "that you are not happy with my approach to the official duties. In fact, sir, I was working very hard. It was only after the administration had allowed the labour leaders to mark the attendance and leave the office without attending to any work, I protested in this way. All these days nobody objected to my leaving the office. Since you have expressed displeasure yesterday. I swear, from today onwards, I will give full day's work. I want to serve the people through the Municipality. "

Leaving the box he had brought on the Mayor's table he said, "Mayor sir, this is for the other members of your family. Can I take leave now?" With these words, not waiting for permission, he left the Mayor's chamber.

"Incredible!" The Chief Officer exclaimed with his eyes wide open: "This is something beyond my comprehension."

But the Mayor had a different opinion. He softly said, "I never consider this to be incredible. After all, this is how a person responds to a given treatment. You treated him as a brother of an all-powerful councillor. He acted in that way. Just see, he was standing here throughout as a mark of respect to superiors. Was he not speaking politely?"

The Chief Officer nodded his head in assent. After a few moments he said: "Sir, I wanted to report in the morning itself. Your calling

Attendance Register yesterday has created a sensation. Today everybody is punctual and you have seen for yourself how people are at work."

"Maintain it," a proud Mayor authoritatively said. "You are the authority in internal administration and you have to assert every now and then."

"I have followed, sir."

The Mayor resumed: "Yesterday evening I met our Backbencher at his home. Poor fellow, looking broke and desperate on losing the election! I consoled him and then persuaded him to head our Committee for the implementation of Government sponsored anti-poverty programmes."

The Chief Officer, after a while, said: "Sir, I wanted to report to you something yesterday itself. Do you know why this Senior, who was a non-believer all these days, contested for the post of a trustee? It is really a spicy tale."

"Tell me please," the Mayor was eager to know.

"It is really a big joke. After you became the Mayor, the Senior didn't have his own way at the council meetings. His every move, every plan and every act was opposed by one member or the other and all his suggestions and proposals were bitterly criticised. It never happened so in the past. Therefore, he felt that the stars were not favourable to him. He consulted his astrologer who openly declared that the Guardian Deity of the town Bajrangbali, was angry because he had neglected Him. Unless he served with all his heart in a big way, Hanumanji would not bestow His grace upon him. On the contrary, He may bring in disgrace and disaster making him lose name, fame and all his wealth. As his stars were very hostile, especially the Saturn on the ascent, the astrologer had cautioned him not to pick up quarrel with anybody for any reason. I think, in a bid to win the grace of Hanumanji, with all the resources at his command he tried his best to become a trustee."

The Mayor heard the story with rapt attention and then enquired: "Do you believe in astrology?"

"Sometimes I do, sir!"

"Keep up the faith. Faith can move mountains. Yet, people in public life must first understand their duties and responsibilities and then only invoke the blessings of the invisible forces. According to me, we must support whatever is good and oppose whatever is bad. God helps those who know the differences between a virtue and a vice." With these words, the Mayor smiled brightly and called the attendant. As soon as he came in, handing over the box of sweets, he instructed: "Prasad from Hanumanji's temple. Distribute to all!"

18. AN UNUSUAL DRAMA

As in the case of the previous meeting, the Mayor thought of holding this monthly meeting also at the feet of the Mahatma.

The meeting began with all the councillors in attendance except the Senior. At the appointed time the Chief Officer, who also happened to be the Secretary, sought the permission to commence the meeting and the Mayor permitted, looking at the vacant chair usually occupied by the Senior. The Chief Officer took the Minutes Book and when he was about to read the minutes of the previous meeting, they heard the Senior calling out loudly. "Mr. Mayor, I am coming. I am coming. Please wait for a while."

Everyone looked at the entrance and here was the Senior standing at the entrance smiling. Surprisingly, today he was in ceremonial dress, 'kurta and pajamas' and red turban. There was a big mark of 'kumkum' on his forehead. He was carrying flowers in one hand and a packet of sweets in the other. Smiling again and again, he went straight to the Mahatma Gandhi's statue. To everybody's surprise, he placed flowers at the feet of the statue. Then, holding the packet of sweets close to his chest, he went round the statue bowing his head. The Mayor was wonderstruck. All these days, the Senior never threw even a fleeting glance but today respectfully he was going round! Therefore, the Mayor smelt something strange, unusual and mysterious in his behaviour. After paying belated respects to the Mahatma in this way the Senior went up to the Mayor, opened the box and dramatically announced, "Mr. Mayor, I have been elected the Managing Trustee of the Hanuman Temple. I

in coming straight from the meeting of the trustees.”

“Fantastic!” The Mayor shook his hands gaily. “Congratulations on behalf of all the members and on my own behalf.” Then he remembered something and said: “Please wait for a while.” He at once went up to the statue, took a rose and offered. “For the present let us share the joy with a single flower. All the best!” The Senior received the flower and said, “Now it is my turn to celebrate. Please take a ‘peda’.”

“It can’t be your turn,” the Mayor said. “Please open your mouth.” The Senior obediently opened and the Mayor put the ‘peda’ into his mouth.

The Senior went round keeping open the packet and requested all the councillors to partake. Everybody congratulated him taking his share of peda. When he went close to the Backbencher he dramatically hugged him as though he was his long-lost friend and declared, “Mr. Mayor, I became a trustee to serve Hanumanji thinking that our colleague is a permanent trustee. I wanted to join hands with him in the service of the Guardian Deity. But as ill luck would have it, when I went in he came out. I must say it is a great loss to the temple.”

But the Backbencher, who was all the while watching, said: “Sir, you have beaten me. Over the years, I served only as an ordinary trustee. But from day one you have become the Managing Trustee. Although I reside close to the Mandir and you, away from it, our Hanumanji has graced you in preference to me. So far as the temple is concerned my full support to you at all times.” Saying so he picked up his share of the ‘peda.’

With this the Senior finished the round and went to his usual seat feeling elated and jubilant.

Then, taking the turban from his head, he kept it on the table in front of him and stood up and requested, “Mr. Mayor, if you permit, I shall take five minutes out of the proceedings, only five minutes.”

The Mayor nodded assent: “Kindly go ahead!”

The Senior got inspired. Like a saintly person he closed his eyes, clasped his hands, murmured a prayer and then opening eyes he loudly uttered, “Bajrangbali ki Jai!” The Backbencher instantly reciprocated with a “Jai!” While all the others watched the Senior in

wonder, bewilderment and amusement. "Since when this gentleman has become a devotee of Hanumanji?" From the last row somebody remarked in the Mayor's hearing.

As if he had not heard the remark, the Senior began: "Mr. Mayor and Honourable Members, Hanumanji is the Guardian Deity of our town from time immemorial. As the legend goes, He happened to rest here in our town for a while when returning from Lanka after meeting Mother Sitaji in captivity. He was the most faithful and loyal servant of Bhagwan Shri Ramachandra. All of us in public life and social service can draw a lot of inspiration from His exploits. In service of His master caring little for comforts He jumped across the sea to reach Lanka. There He spent sleepless nights in search of Mother Sita abducted by that wretched demon Ravana. After destroying Ashoka Garden, His tail was set on fire and bearing all the pain and agony, He set the whole city of Lanka on fire just to show Ravana what the future held for him. Then how He flew to the Himalayas to fetch the life-giving herb Sanjivini to save the life of Lakshmana. He plucked the peak of the mountain itself and carried to Lanka and saved the precious life of Lakshmana. In the battle of Lanka, He bravely fought and crushed the valiant warriors, I mean the cruel demons."

He paused for a while and looked at the audience.

"Mr. Mayor, can I continue?" He again sought permission. "Why not?" The Mayor repeated, "Why not? After all, Hanuman is our Superman. Any story about Him is worth listening to. It is good for this world as well as for the next one too!" He wanted to find out whether he had in his stock any more tales about Hanuman.

But the Senior did not wish to continue any more as he had something else to do. So, all that he said in conclusion was that the great hero of the Ramayana was gracious enough to dwell permanently in that town as the Guardian Deity and blessed everyone in the town. He added that the centuries old temple needed urgent repairs and renovation but it had no funds. Therefore, it was decided to raise donations from the well-wishers and devotees and carry out the work. "As the Managing Trustee of the temple, in course of time, I would approach the Municipality also seeking some donation which should be considered favourably." Again, he joined his palms as humbly as he could and then sat down.

The Mayor now felt relieved. He asked, "Can we resume the business now?"

"Sure!" said the Senior. Then in the next instant pretending to have remembered something, he said, "Mr. Mayor, please wait for a second!" With that he searched for something in the pockets of his kurta and not finding there searched in the pocket of his pajamas and yes, it was there a closed cover. He took out and holding it high so that everyone could see, he announced loudly: "This is a letter from the Chief Minister addressed to our beloved Mayor. Though I do not know the exact contents, I believe there is a mention about me. Well, I had been to the State Capital yesterday and therefore I have brought this letter myself. Now the cover can be opened and the contents be read out and discussed. But as my presence may embarrass you folks I shall take leave. Decision may be intimated to me tomorrow."

The announcement made by him about the CM's letter was not at all expected by anyone, particularly the Mayor. The Backbencher, somehow, was suspecting some foul play or the other from the very beginning and his suspicion proved right.

Well, everybody knew for certain what the contents would be, but nobody had imagined that the drama enacted by the Senior started like a hilarious comedy would end up in a mystery story.

Without waiting for the Mayor to grant him the formal permission to leave, taking the liberty, the Senior put on his turban and picked up the packet that had still some more 'pedas.' Then, as though he had completed his mission by setting the ball rolling he, without looking back, left, yes, keeping on the table in front of the Mayor, the CM's letter he had brought.

The Mayor silently looked at the councillors and they in turn at him. After a few silent moments, the Mayor thought of resuming the meeting and asked the Secretary to read out the minutes of the previous meeting.

19. BOLT FROM THE BLUE

It was in an atmosphere charged with great excitement and uneasiness that the meeting resumed. All though the minutes were read out in a pin drop silence, there was so much of agitation in the mind of the Mayor that he could hardly make out anything out of the minutes and so was the position of the councillors with their mind set on something else outside the meeting hall. After reading out, the Secretary enquired whether the minutes could be taken as confirmed. The councillors mechanically nodded their head in assent.

Now the Mayor picked up the envelope from the Chief Minister, lying on the table all the while. After examining that the seals were in tact, he handed over to the Secretary with instructions to open and read out in everybody's hearing. The Secretary stood up and displayed and declared that the envelope was a closed one and that the seals were in tact. The councillors did not want all those minute details as they were eager to know the contents, which they were sure, would be very explosive. The Secretary tore open the envelope and took out the letter dramatically and again showed it with the envelope that was empty as if to tell the councillors that there were no more letters and that there was only one!

The Mayor did not want any more red tapes. He said, "Mr. Chief Officer, kindly read out at once without taking us through any more official steps required for such official letters." The Chief Officer however was cautious. "Sir, I am not delaying. I just wanted to find out whether it is addressed personally in your name and also, whether it is to be treated as a Secret and Confidential communication. I am happy that it does not bear any indication of secrecy. So let me read out now."

"Dear Mr. Mayor,

"We are given to understand that in your town there is a Maidan named after some obscure and unknown person whose background nobody in the town knows. We learn that in recognition of the meritorious services to the people of your town the Senior-most councillor had appealed to rename the Maidan in memory of his late father who himself, we learn was a great social worker besides being a freedom fighter. Therefore in the fitness of things it is requested that the name of the Maidan be changed as early as

possible under information to us. As an honour and mark of our respect to that selfless soul, we have decided to send the Honourable Home Minister to your place to participate in the renaming ceremony. Please therefore intimate to this office the exact date.

“We also learn that at the time of ‘Bhoomi Poojan’ function you people had stumbled upon a rare statue of great value and the statue is now kept as an item of exhibition in the Council Hall unguarded and unprotected. As a large number of statues and idols are smuggled out of the country unauthorisedly and illegally, our Government has taken a decision to collect and preserve such rare items in a museum in the State Capital with proper security arrangements. Therefore in the public interest we have decided to move the statue to the State Capital and a team of experts will shortly visit your place for packing properly and transportation to our place. Kindly co-operate.

“With regard to changing the name of the Maidan, the action may be taken on top-priority as we hear that there was a ‘marcha’ and ‘dharna’ in front of the Municipal Office when hundreds of people have demanded the change of name immediately. Since such agitations will have a long term bearing on the law and order situation in the state, please see that you will resolve this issue smoothly, effectively and urgently.

“With kind regards, Chief Minister.”

As soon as he finished reading, the Backbencher was quick to react: “‘Kind regards!’ What sort of kind regards are these when cruelty is shown to us in its ugliest form? This is most unreasonable. We have to rename the Maidan after a pan-beedi shop owner who ran the shop on an encroached land calling him as a freedom fighter and a social worker. If we do it there will not be a fraud greater than this on this entire earth! It is really surprising that the Chief Minister of the State should write to us in this way without verifying the facts or calling for our remarks. Strange! Really! In fact his words acted as a thunder-bolt, although our Secretary read out as lightly as he could to look like the fall of rain in tiny drops.”

To the Mayor, the letter came like a bolt from the blue. He never expected that the whole episode would take such a turn that would upset all his plans and ideas. Now he was literally forced to take a

decision much against his wishes. Should he stick to his stand and wait for sometime hoping that some body would appear on the scene or the Guardian Deity Hanumanji would send somebody to give the clues of the Mahatma and the Maidan or should he accept the reality that politics could make or mar anything and everything in the so-called modern society that was boasting of the rule by democratic system of government which was nothing short of the law of jungle where only the might was right? For a moment, he felt he was completely lost in the wilderness knowing not how to come out of it.

Silent moments ticked by and all the councillors sat like dolls looking as if they had completely lost their capacity and power of perception, thinking, acting and reacting. After sometime, the Mayor thought that the Municipality could not afford to ignore the letter from the Chief Minister. He raised his voice and like a bell ringing in the stillness of the early hours of the morning, enquired, "What should we do now, the Honourable Members can express their opinion one by one."

All the councillors looked at each other knowing not what to convey. However, the eldest among them felt that he should tell something instead of allowing the matter to remain inconclusive. After clearing his throat in a clear voice he said, "Mr. Mayor, now nothing is left for us to discuss, debate and decide. When the Chief Minister's directive is very clear why should we go by sentiments? After all Gandhi is somebody's father and the new name that we are going to have for the Maidan is also of somebody's father. At least in the second case we know who is that somebody. Right or wrong he is a colleague of ours in the Municipal Council. After all we need a name for the place to call and it could be either 'x' or 'y'. We have been wasting our time and energy for the last few months only on the issue of naming the Maidan. We shall settle this issue once for all and at least from now onwards embark on some constructive activities. As to the statue, the Chief Minister is right. We do not have adequate security arrangements to guard the statue of immense value. Let it go to the place that it deserves where proper safety and security arrangements are available." After conveying his views he looked at others for their approval.

"He is right, Mr. Mayor," all the councillors concurred: "We fully

support and agree with his views." They declared in a chorus and that encouraged the elderly councillor to state further: "We need not discuss or debate further because, according to me there is absolutely no scope to defend the saint Mahatma Gandhi. Till date no one has come forward to tell us who he was and what his accomplishments were."

"The sculptor who had made the statue created more confusion and mystery by inscribing in coded words like, Non-violence, Truth and Love. Then political freedom and freedom from poverty, illiteracy and disease! What do these words really mean? In the ancient times, people did have enough time to study, think, meditate and understand the intricacies of life. But today the modern man has to toil day in and day out to maintain a satisfactory standard of living. He does not find time even to love the members of his own family let alone others. Then Non-violence, was it there during the days of Veda, Ramayana and Mahabharata? I have my own doubt about our ancestors following it. Think of Truth! In today's society, can an honest man make a living?"

Somehow the Backbencher did not relish his words. He grew impatient and stood up to interrupt: "Mayor sir, what is all this? At the beginning of the meeting, we had to hear the tale of Hanumanji and now it is a tall talk on philosophy straying far away from the agenda proper. All this is nothing but disgusting and disgraceful. If I will feel that we should obey the command of the Chief Minister, I would like our Council to disobey in totality. Please therefore record my protest and dissent to both the proposals and convey to the Chief Minister accordingly. For the protest of mine I am willing to accept any punishment including public crucifixion." After a pause he continued, "Mayor sir, I hold you in high esteem and obey all your commands. But please understand my feelings also. You did not like my idea of organizing a rally to counteract the Senior's slogan shouting that day and therefore we have landed in a mess today. I am frank and outspoken. Please pardon me!"

The Mayor did not react and after a while signalled the Secretary to take up the next item on the agenda. Obediently the Secretary announced, "Honourable sirs, during the last meeting the discussion on anti-poverty programmes could not make a head way. Can we take up that issue now?"

The Backbencher stood up and waved his hand to signify, "No!"

"But, why?" the Mayor broke his silence.

"The poor have survived through the centuries without any help from any quarters including the Government. And they will continue to do so even if you rush all help. It is a permanent curse on the human society, which nobody can remove. You can only reduce the level of poverty and not eliminate it all together. Therefore, they can afford to wait for a few more months as they have already waited for ages. Let us first rename the Maidan, which is our priority at present. We shall attend one by one." He sarcastically said and sat down wiping the perspiration appearing on his forehead.

Hearing his words, the Mayor suddenly felt tired and exhausted. He thought that there was no point in continuing with the meeting. He called it a day and left for his chamber.

But silently the Backbencher followed him and as soon as the Mayor, sat down, the Backbencher in a low voice meekly stated, "Mayor sir, kindly excuse me for my harsh words and acts during the meeting. I never meant it really. But kindly understand my feelings also. I have come here to inform you that I am going beyond the mere words of protest of mine."

The Mayor smiled. "I knew for certain that you would never stop at that. But please do not resort to violence in any form. Non-violence should be the watchword having worshipped the statue of Mahatma sincerely all these days. And with that I must also tell you that we should have patience to wait and watch. Then let me also caution you that going against the people in authority is always perilous. I think you are very well aware that the Chief Minister if intends so to do, at a stroke of a pen, can order for the dissolution of our Council in the name of Law and Order, appoint an Administrator and get the things stated the letter, done. Should this happen bringing in shame and disgrace to every one of us? Instead it is better we obey and earn the goodwill and gratitude of the State Administration. Then, look after your family and your business. Municipality and social service are always secondary!"

Nodding his head in acceptance of his advice, the Backbencher took leave with a light heart.

Like this the long day of high drama that was amusing, boring,

gusting, exciting, frustrating and tiring came to an end. Before leaving for residence the Mayor hoped and prayed Hanumanji for better days ahead.

20. BACKBENCHER, THE GREAT

The Mayor had thought that the Senior would call at the Municipal Office the next day to know the outcome of the meeting. But he did not turn up. It was on the third day that he paid a visit. He arrived with the Principal and knocked at the door of the Mayor's chamber. After knocking, without waiting for any formal permission both of them virtually stormed in. Dragging the visitors' chairs haphazardly they sat down with their face fuming with fury. Today there was no exchange of usual pleasantries and the Mayor thought that something grave must have taken place. Sensing the trouble, to refuse, he smiled and wished, "Good Morning, gentlemen!"

Both of them hurriedly said a half-hearted, "Good Morning!" and in the next instant, the Senior in a high pitch of voice shouted, "Mr. Mayor, I never thought that I am going to be cheated in this way. This is nothing short of stabbing from the behind. I should not have been deceived by you, the very Mayor—the first citizen of this town. This will not bring you or the high seat you occupy any glory or greatness!"

Hearing the accusation, knowing not the background, the Mayor was first puzzled and then perplexed. Nobody had attacked him so far personally in that crude and rude manner. Still maintaining his cool, he politely enquired, "Tell me what has happened and what is my role in the happenings!"

"What should I tell and why should I tell?" The Senior thundered. "I never thought that, that wretched Backbencher and you—the very Mayor both will join hands to hatch a plan to dethrone me and tarnish my image!"

Though the remark was harsh and uncharitable the Mayor remained unruffled. He insisted, "Gentlemen, tell me what wrong did I cause to you. Unless you explain clearly how will I come to know that injustice has been done to you? Please have patience, calm down, take it easy and tell!"

The Senior wanted to tell something in a roar. But as the situation seemed to go out of control, the Mayor told in clear-cut terms: "You are here to convey something, please speak politely without raising your voice. Let me remind you that you are in the Mayor's Chamber and not in the Council Hall where everyone has the freedom to express with immunity attached to it. But here the office decorum, decency and protocol will prevail. I am the Mayor here and you are only a councillor. Let us understand our roles properly."

On hearing his words, the Senior became outrageous. Now it was very clear that both of them were heading for a heated argument that would end up in an everlasting unpleasantness. Not wanting this to happen, the Principal intervened and started the discussion afresh: "Mr. Mayor, you must be aware of the facts."

The Mayor grew impatient. He raised his voice: "My dear sir, why do you go by the impression that I knew everything and I am a party to everything that happens in this town? If you keep the secret to yourselves, no further discussions please. You can leave this chamber now!" He was very firm.

The Senior opened his mouth to blast. But the Principal touched his shoulder softly and advised in a whisper to keep cool. Thereafter, by way of a report he revealed, "Mr. Mayor I am sorry to tell you that someone, why should I say someone, the Backbencher has put up a sign-board in the Maidan. You must be aware of it!"

The Mayor was stunned. Out of surprise his mouth fell open and eyes twinkled. He at once rebutted: "Sign-board, I am aware? What is all this non-sense?"

"Sense or no-sense!" The Principal disclosed without any emotional attachment. "But the fact remains. All these years the Maidan had no name and there was no board to announce its name, either. But today it has a board!"

"At least tell me what does it read!" He pleaded out stretching both of his palms.

"Well, although you are aware, you are forcing us to tell," the Principal in a complaining tone said, "It reads something like, 'Gandhi Maidan. Trespassers will be prosecuted. Board donated by the Backbencher.'"

"Really?" the Mayor was wonder-struck. "Whether you agree or

ot, I know nothing about the board nor about the donation made. am not at all a party to this board."

"If you are not a party," the Principal diplomatically asked, "then why can't you get it pulled down and throw into the River Sarayu?" He stared at the Mayor's countenance as if to read his reaction. The Mayor understood the trick. At once he asked, "Why should I throw when I have not planted..."

"You must throw, because the Maidan is a municipal property and the board stands on it!"

"O.K. Because it is a municipal property, one councillor has planted and on the same footing I feel another councillor has a right to remove it!"

"But another councillor has no right. That is why we are here. It may result in an unnecessary conflict." Now the Mayor realised that the matter was not as simple as it looked to be. He at once summoned the Chief Officer. He came in and greeted everyone cordially. When the Mayor told all that had happened he too was astounded.

"Now can we remove the board?" Looking terribly worried the Mayor specifically asked. The Chief Officer, a bureaucrat not wishing to take sides nor a decision, tactfully advised: "Sir, let us not do anything hastily. I will summon the Law Officer working in our office. It is better we view everything from legal angle." He stood up.

"Please be seated here," the Mayor suggested. "We shall send words to him. In the meantime shall we get some tea?" Then remembering the words of the Backbencher he added, "A cup of tea is always a good stimulant!" He pressed the bell. Attendant came. The Mayor gave the message to the Law Officer to come down immediately. He also told the attendant to get tea. Nodding his head obediently as usual, the attendant left. Observing that the atmosphere had cooled down sufficiently the Mayor began conversing, "Tell me what is your father's name?" The Senior did not reply. On his behalf, the Principal said, "His father's name was Kannayyalal. But his nickname was Pinnu Shait. He wanted that the Maidan should be renamed after the nick name, that is Pinnu Shait Maidan."

To the Mayor the named sounded very strange. Laughing

inwardly he suggested, "Kannayyalal Maidan would be very ideal. Indirectly it would have referred to Lord Krishna also. Through the saint, Mahatma Gandhi we would have ultimately reached Lord Krishna."

Breaking the silence, the Senior said, "But none in the town knows who was Kannayyalal. I don't want a repetition of Mahatma Gandhi. So, Mr. Mayor, I suggest Pinnu Shait Maidan only!"

The Mayor thought for a while and opined: "Name is good. But after sometime people might make use of only first letters and call it P.S.Maidan. I have seen how our Swami Vivekanand Road has become S.V.Road and Maharshi Dayanand Park, M.D.Park. When we want to perpetuate the memory of great personalities, we tend to abbreviate and disfigure beyond recognition."

"Then what is your suggestion, Mr. Mayor?" The Principal wanted to know.

"It should either be Pinnu Maidan or Shait Maidan so that it will not lend itself for any abbreviation. Please consider!"

By then the Law Officer came in. He bowed before the Mayor as if bowing before the Judge while the court was in session. The Mayor asked him to be seated and requested the Chief Officer to inform him all that had taken place.

Tea came and the attendant served. All of them drank silently and in the meantime, the Chief Officer in a very low tone, explained to the Law Officer all that had taken place. The Law Officer carefully listened. He understood the situation and then thought, considered but hesitated to convey the legal position on the tricky problem. The Mayor asked him to tell frankly without fear or favour in mind. After all who on this earth could be above the law of the land, he expressed.

But the Law Officer knew that the Law depended on the precedents and the interpretations. The Principal was however very critical. Why should the Municipality pay attention to somebody's mischief and give credence to it?

After a few moments of silence, the Mayor insisted. "Please give your frank opinion on the display of the sign-board from legal point of view. I want to solve this once for all." The Law Officer took out his handkerchief from his pocket and quietly wiped the perspiration

on his forehead. Then clearing his throat he gave his opinion stating, 'Sir, there is nothing wrong in the display of the sign-board and frankly speaking, nobody should object!'

"Non-sense!" the Senior blasted. "What do you mean by 'Nothing wrong.' Is this a property belonging to that cunning fellow, the Backbencher who can put up the signboard as he chooses? This is a public property. Understand the position clearly. It is not his private property!"

"I have understood the position very clearly, sir." The Law Officer tried to convince as politely as he could. "Legally speaking, I do not consider anything wrong in it."

"Law is an ass!" the Principal scornfully commented. "At least tell us in commoners' language, how do you say that it is right!"

Not carried away by his remarks, the Law Officer quietly wiped out again the perspiration on his forehead and then slowly explained, "Sir, the name of the place is Gandhi Maidan and the board also declares the same thing. Since it is a public property, under Law one is liable for being prosecuted if there is any trespassing or encroachment. There is nothing wrong in cautioning the general public about it. The expenses to make the board are borne by someone as a donation for a common cause in the public interest. Therefore whatever stated in the sign-board appears to be perfectly in order and legal also!"

"Can you not throw that board away?" the Principal asked the most pertinent question.

"Why should we throw away when it is erected to identify the place, sir?" The Law Officer innocently asked.

"We want to change the name into something else," the Senior openly told: "In that event can we uproot and throw away?"

"Why do you want to throw it away, sir?" The Law Officer was all innocence: "On the same board you can repaint the new name wiping the old one!"

"We cannot do it," the Senior lost his patience. "The donor of the board is not willing for the change of the name. He wants to retain the same name. So, we may have to have a new board with a new name. In that event the present board cannot and should not remain there."

"Can you not ask him to take away his board peacefully?" The Law Officer gave the most practical solution!

"He has planted the board deliberately to oppose our move to change the name." The Principal reiterated. "In that event do we have a legal right to remove the present board or not?"

"Once the name is officially changed," the Law Officer opined. "You can ask him to remove his board peacefully."

"Suppose he does not remove," the Senior asked, "what will happen?"

"The place will have two names," the Law Officer stated, detached. "And that will create confusion as one place cannot have two names side by side."

The Mayor now felt that there would be no end to this question and answer session. And so he wanted to conclude once for all. "What is your opinion then? Let us not waste our time and energy on this."

Now the Law Officer had this to say: "Sir, the issue seems to be a bit ticklish. Whenever there is a dispute, we first go by negotiation, then conciliation and if we fail, ultimately we will resort to litigation. A legal battle will be fought in a court of law. The court will take its own time and then the issue might remain unresolved for years and years. Therefore, if I am permitted to suggest, both the parties can be brought together for a discussion across the table to sort out the differences if any and settle the issue amicably."

"Suppose we remove the sign-board and threw away forcibly what would happen?" The Senior asked authoritatively.

"Well, sir," the Law Officer diplomatically opined. "Any thing might happen. They might have already taken photographs of the board and they can very well approach a court of law and bring a stay and prevent you from renaming the place once for all. Therefore, a compromise is always the safest route to bring about an end to any dispute. Litigation is not only expensive and time consuming but also heart-burning. If possible avoid it at all costs. This is my humble submission."

"What sort of compromise can we have?" The Senior looked at the Principal meaningfully. "That too with that rigid person who

oes not know anything beyond selling jaggery and chillis?" By this time his anger had completely died down and he was looking like a spent force.

The Principal thought for a while and suggested, "Well, whatever be his profession or business he has successfully foiled your bid to rename the Maidan. After all why do you want to rename it when you are not going to derive any benefit out of changing the name? Please therefore do have a compromise within your mind itself rather than touching anybody's feet. I mean reconcile yourself to the reality. Let us not waste our time and energy on petty things like this. I have already suggested you to spend more time for the cause of the temple of Hanumanji's."

The Senior however did not relish the idea of reconciliation. How could he abandon the case so dear to his heart and surrender unto the feet of the rivals and live on with his unfulfilled mission? Definitely his father now in heaven would not pardon him over his failure in getting such a small thing done. Then would it not amount to somebody, a useless fellow throwing a spoiled egg at him and declare that the Senior was good for nothing, that too after spending so much of money, time and energy to reach the Chief Minister and persuade him to instruct the Municipality to rename after his father? Nobody worth the salt would ever withdraw from the mission in a complete surrender. When the Backbencher who had opposed his every move, every step and every idea, he should be taught such a lesson that he would never raise his head again!

The Mayor, who was all the while listening and watching the fun felt that a great drama was unfolding in his presence though the Backbencher the hero, was not present. Yes, the Backbencher had kept up his word. He had neither organized a protest rally nor resorted to hostile slogan shouting but had skillfully stalled the move to change the name.

As the Mayor was absorbed in thoughts like this, silent moments ticked by and in the meantime, the private secretary came in with a visiting card. The Mayor looked at it. It was from the Bank Manager. "Please ask him to wait for sometime." The Mayor instructed. "Yes, sir!" The secretary nodding his head went out.

"I have some visitors," the Mayor indicated that they should

leave his chamber now. But in his life the Senior had never left any work half-finished so far and therefore looking at the Mayor he stated, "Mr. Mayor, I know if I proceed legally it may take years. I also know that the Backbencher is such a person that he would never budge even by an inch even if our Hanumanji would request him! Knowing fully well the aspirations of both the parties, you as the Mayor can think of a compromise. Whatever you think fit, I will accept. All that I need is that my father's name should appear in the place in some form or the other. I am aware of the positive decision taken by the Council and I am grateful to all of you. Please do not allow one dissenting member to rule the roost."

The Mayor attentively listened and told, "Let me try. But give me a fortnight's time. If I am unsuccessful, please don't blame. After all each one has his own views and ideas and our friend, the Backbencher cannot be an exception!" Saying so, he wound up the most exciting meeting he ever had after becoming the Mayor. Before leaving, the Senior, for the first time clasped his hands as a mark of respect to the Mayor. Acknowledging, the Mayor went up to the door, wished "Good Day!" and saw them off.

Smiling, he returned to his seat and said to himself, "The Backbencher is really great! One must admire his strategy and ingenuity. He has proved to the world that even an ant can kill an elephant." He then pressed the calling bell. The attendant instantly appeared. "Please send the visitor in," he ordered.

The Bank Manager came in with a broad smile. He joined his palms respectfully and said, "Good Morning, sir!" The Mayor reciprocated: "Very Good Morning! This morning is really good."

"Do you mean weather, sir?" The Manager enquired eagerly. In a jovial mood the Mayor answered: "The morning is very good in every respect. Both the weather and the visitors!"

"I hope I am not disturbing you, sir!" The Manager was apologetic. "No," the Mayor laughed. "Not at all. Now tell me what can I do for you."

"Sir," the Manager gratefully said, "My Bank and myself are indebted to you for the good gesture of giving a deposit of five lakhs of rupees. Really it is a great encouragement to me especially in a new environment."

"Well," the Mayor now looked serious. "This is a very little thing the institution can do for another. But I am sorry I have not been able to push through that anti-poverty programme. For one reason or the other we are keeping ourselves engaged in petty things."

"I know it, sir," the Manager tried to console. "The government machinery works in that way only. Like an elephant it is sturdy but moves slowly. It requires a lot of food to eat but even the leaves of any tree will do!" The Mayor interrupted, "You have made use of a very good figure of speech. You said the elephant requires a lot of food but it could consist of leaves. Can you tell what is the hidden meaning?"

"O, I never meant anything." The Manager gaily said, "In fact it is nothing beyond what it states in simple words. But there is one more saying, sir. The elephant eats a lot but it is only the leaves, whereas an ant eats a little but it is nothing but sugar." "Good!" the Mayor appreciated, "that means even if we do something it should be measured quality-wise and not quantity-wise. Anyway I never thought that the bankers are philosophical also."

"Why, sir?" The Manager laughed. "No doubt we spend our time in counting money and writing accounts we are also human beings. We always believe that behind every Rupee there is a human being. Without a human touch, the business of banking never thrives!" "I am happy you said it." The Mayor appreciated wholeheartedly. "In these days of complaints and resentment against the customer service of the banks I am glad that there are a good number of bankers who understand the need for quality service. Please keep up! Now tell me the purpose of your visit."

"Sir," the Manager said, "I will not take much of your time. Coming Sunday, please keep yourself free. I had mentioned about our village adoption programme for economic upliftment of villagers through the bank finance. We have adopted a village twelve kilometers from here. The name is Sarayu Village on the banks of the River Sarayu. Please make it convenient to be the Chief Guest and bless us as well as the villagers." "Oh, sure!" The Mayor accepted the invitation. "In fact I wanted an outing very badly."

The Manager then added, "We are also going to distribute school uniforms to the children in the village. If Madam could attend our

programme to hand over this gift, the Bank will be obliged." "No problem!" The Mayor accepted the invitation and said, "She will definitely be glad to accompany me and participate in this sacred task."

"Thank you. Thank you, sir!" The Manager was very happy. "You are most welcome!" The Mayor gaily shook his hands wholeheartedly.

21. MAHATMA'S MONKEYS

Sarayu village as the name indicated stood on the banks of the rivulet Sarayu twelve kilometers from the town. The tiny village was inhabited by fifty families basically farmers and milkmen. The land was owned by some wealthy landlords in the town and the villagers had to pay annual rent by way of one or two maunds of grain for the use of the land. The agriculture depended on the rainfall as the water in the Sarayu was flowing only during the rainy season. The Bank had adopted this village for development by way of bank finance and also to provide basic amenities of life by taking proper steps with the authorities. As scheduled the programme of Adoption of the Village by the Bank took place with the Mayor in the chair and the Mayoress as the Guest of Honour. The whole village turned up to attend the programme including the children—to receive the gift of school uniforms.

After the formal programme, the Mayoress wanted to go round the village to see personally the life of the villagers. The village presented a grim and a gloomy picture of poverty and the Mayoress could not bear the sight of women poorly dressed. During the round, deeply moved, she expressed in a very low tone, "Dear, can we not do something personally at least to improve their lot? During the festival of Diwali I would like to come down here to present saris to all the women. I never thought that people are so poor. You people are fond of talking about poverty line, below poverty line and above poverty line. Now you must invite the 'pundits' of the poverty line and ask them where the line starts and where it ends and when it is going to end. I can't bear this sight any more. Really, I can't!"

The Mayor did not react to her words as he too was deeply moved by the very sight of living conditions of the villagers, which he had never expected. He called the Bank Manager to his side and in confidence asked, "Do you really believe that with the help of bank finance their standard of living will improve?" "I am optimistic, sir!" the Manager told with an air of confidence. "I have tried with success in some other place. Our objective is to try to convince the people to take up some vocation or the other with the help of bank loan and see that they are gainfully employed. That way the poverty grown over the decades in this country cannot be eradicated over night, sir!"

The Mayor not convinced fully, did not wish to discuss further knowing fully well the limitations of a bank manager. With that the visit to the village was over. As they sat in the car, the Manager thanked both of them profusely. Smiling brightly the Mayor said, "Bye!" while the Mayoress waved her hand in appreciation. The car sped away towards the town.

After a few silent moments the Mayoress started conversing. "Dear, I never thought that there is so much of poverty in our villages. Never! Did you see those young children, under nourished and underfed? What could be the reason for all this?" The Mayor remained tongue-tied, as he too was shocked to see the abject poverty stalking in the village. He was all the while feeling that people in authority never tried sincerely to eradicate poverty at all. When he remained silent, the Mayoress asked again: "Dear, you have not answered my question!" Now the Mayor's heart opened up: "I can see everywhere that the nature is rich and bountiful in our country, especially the country side. But all the people do not have the necessary wherewithal to exploit the resources. Interestingly enough the towns and cities have come up whereas the villages like this have lagged behind losing forever the race for prosperity. Now they are trying through bank finance as a panacea for all ailments. But I have my own doubts about the effectiveness of this particular tool, finance, to bring about progress and prosperity. Perhaps the planners have never thought of an alternative route for eradication of poverty. At least in extreme cases they could have tried giving some non-refundable grants. Instead of loans they can give the tools in kind to work with. Well, they may think that there

is going to be a wholesale misuse or leakages in the welfare machinery itself?"

The Mayoress, not convinced said, "I am not suggesting any remedy for the country as a whole. We have visited this place and we have seen the pathetic living conditions of the people. I am asking, can we not do something at our level at least?"

"What can I say," the Mayor said in a complaining tone: "To me it appears, the public servants are indifferent at everything. Look at our own Municipality. We have yet to implement the anti-poverty programme in our town. We are wasting our precious time in debating and discussing petty things like changing the names of the streets and grounds."

"Dear, can you not stop all this nonsense once for all?" When the Mayoress expressed like this, as if to give an answer, the car slowed down and stopped at the edge of the road. The driver looking back at the Mayor apologetically reported, "Sir, one of the front tyres, it appears got punctured and let me see which one it is." He hurriedly got down, went to the front side and announced, "Yes, it is the wheel on the left hand side that has become flat. Sir, we have two spare wheels and within minutes I will change. Please bear with me."

The Mayor permitted: "We are not in a hurry. Take your own time." With these words both of them got down allowing the driver to do the job.

The Mayor started pacing up and down while the Mayoress stood on the edge of the road looking round for wild flowers. Suddenly her eyes caught sight of an old finger post pointing towards what looked like an untended garden with a beaten track in between, starting from the Highway. She was surprised to see the finger post and at once in quick steps rushed to the Mayor who was now watching a squirrel climb a tree. The Mayoress went close to him and hurriedly told, "Dear, can you not come with me for a while? I want to show you something very interesting." "What is that interesting thing?" The Mayor followed her with great inquisitiveness. She walked ahead and stopped at the spot from where the beaten track started. Pointing at the finger-post she enthusiastically said, "Look at that board and see for yourself what

is written there: It is Gandhi Ashram. I think this beaten track leads to the Ashram."

He stood there gaping at the post. Then in the next instant he decided something and told the driver: "Please carry on with your work. Madam and myself will find out where this beaten track leads to!" The driver nodded his head in obedience and the Mayor and Mayoress walked down the track. After covering some distance the trees became sparse and they reached a maidan looking like the Gandhi Maidan. On the top of the maidan was standing a hermitage with a few huts and a garden in the background.

The blowing breeze brought to their ears the human voice indicating habitation. The Mayor was thrilled. He told his wife, "This ashram must be the Ashram of that great saint Mahatma Gandhi and here we must be able to get full information about him and his achievements. Therefore let us go there and see!" Enthusiastically they walked up and when they were nearing, the dogs in the ashram started barking to announce the arrival of the visitors. When they reached the gate, the barking became intense and an inmate came to the gate to see who the visitors were.

"Is this Gandhi Ashram?" the Mayor enquired. The inmate a young man clad only in a loin cloth, without opening the gate, nodded his head and answered: "Yes, please."

"I am the Mayor of the town and this is my wife," the Mayor gently said: "We are here to meet the Head of the Ashram." "Please wait!" the inmate respectfully said: "I shall obtain the permission and come back within a minute." With that he ran in, came back and announced: "Sir, the Mother has permitted you people to come in. Please come." He opened the gate and led them to the visitor's hut. They were given water to drink and thereafter he took them to the prayer hall, which was in a different hut but a bigger one. On the floor they could see the grass mats spread so that the inmates could sit and pray in front of a dais and on the dais, yes, on the dais fixed to the wall was a painting. Both the Mayor and the Mayoress could not believe their eyes because it was a life size painting of Mahatma Gandhi but in colours! It was in the same posture of walking, wearing a loin cloth, a shawl, and a walking stick in hand, and with spectacles and foot-wear and the timepiece on the left hand side of his waist.

As they were keenly watching the painting, from the side door entered an aged lady neatly dressed in white clothes to match her snow-white hair indicating her old age. She was tall and straight and there was an unusual glow on her face befitting the head of a hermitage. Her eyes were shining and she smiled heartily at the visitors. Without waiting for any formalities she declared, "Hearty Welcome to our Ashram! You are the first Mayor to visit this Ashram!"

The Mayor clasped his hands with all respect and apologized: "Sorry, Mother, you have to pardon us. We have reached here sheerly out of coincidence. Our car broke down on the way back from Sarayu Village and we saw the finger post. Out of curiosity we took the beaten track leading up to here."

"Doesn't matter," she heartily laughed. Now the Mayor and Mayoress both could see her teeth in tact with a sparkling brightness indicating good health in spite of her advancing age.

Then she slowly stated, "Whatever be the reason, it is good that you have thought of paying a visit only by reading the finger-post. In fact, I learn, on the Highway a good number of vehicles are plying. But nobody cares to make even a brief halt and visit this place. It appears people do not have time and patience these days. Well, that way it is wrong on my part to expect anyone to drop in here or come on a pilgrimage!" She heavily sighed.

A sudden thought crossed the Mayor's mind. Was Mahatma Gandhi living here and this lady called Mother was she his widow or a daughter? He wanted to ask, but in the next instant, he thought that the etiquette demanded a patient hearing instead of asking questions.

Changing the topic, the Mother stated softly: "We are grateful to the Municipality. Every month the Ashram receives punctually the maintenance grant of Rs.500/- Your people are really efficient and duty-conscious and I admire all of you!"

The Mayor was wonderstruck. His Municipality sending a monthly grant to Gandhi Ashram was incredible news to him. But how was that no councillor nor the Chief Officer was aware of this monthly remittance? Were they hiding something from him? It was really a great mystery. Being unable to control his curiosity, he mechanically stood up at once, went close to the Mother and asked,

Madam, did you mention that our Municipality is regularly remitting you the grant? If so, since when? At least I am not aware of it. Really I am not."

"Well," the Mother looked blank for a while, detached. Then she narrated the story. Her husband the wealthiest man in the town was a great admirer of Mahatma Gandhi. He participated fully in the freedom struggle involving himself in every possible way and he had donated all his wealth leaving nothing for the family. Mahatma Gandhi had visited the town and spent a whole day. He also addressed the citizens of the town in the Maidan that actually belonged to them. To commemorate his visit to the town, the Maidan was named Gandhi Maidan and her husband got a life-size statue of the Mahatma cast in bronze and installed there. Then he also established an ashram called Gandhi Ashram to show to the world how the teachings of Gandhi were practical and relevant to the modern world. The ashram was started with all enthusiasm but perhaps against the wishes of the fate. The same year, the tiny Sarayu was in unusual floods bringing everything under its sway. In the flash floods the entire town except Hanumanji's temple was washed away. Gandhi Maidan was in an elevated place and so it was thought that the Ashram would be safe but the floods did not spare the Maidan also. Mercilessly the floodwater took away the ashram, inmates, cattle and also the statue of the Mahatma. As the fate would have it, when everybody was dead and gone, perhaps she was destined to survive as the flood cast her away at the bottom of this maidan over here. An old 'sadhu' who had a hermitage here saw her lying in an unconscious state. With the help of the inmates she was taken to the ashram and was given the first aid.

After she had regained consciousness, without loss of time, he sent his men to the town to convey to her people that she was alive. But they came back empty-handed bringing with them the tragic news of large-scale destruction of life and property. They also stated that rehabilitation and reconstruction work was going, on war footing and in the rehabilitation camps the survivors were asked to claim their properties if any. Her husband had already donated everything for the cause of the nation. And so she had nothing to claim back. Then she had also lost all the members of the family and so she had none to have a reunion. When she had brought this

to the notice of the kind sadhu he was deeply moved and expressed that the fate should not have been so cruel to her. All that he said at that time was if she had no place to go back, his ashram would welcome her stay. He also stated that since her husband was running an ashram, in the fitness of the things, she must have known the code of conduct of life in an ashram. He assured her of full protection and also the freedom to carry on activities that should bring in general welfare to human beings.

After a few years, pleased with her conduct, character, hard work and capacity to organize the things he nominated her as his successor. At that time she asked him whether she could name this ashram as Gandhi Ashram. Gladly accepting her suggestion he expressed that it was too small an honour to be conferred upon a great soul. Appreciating, he said that Gandhiji was a great devotee of Lord Rama and that he propagated that chanting Lord Rama's name was a panacea for all ailments. As the sadhu was also a devotee of Lord Rama he suggested erection of a hut to serve as a prayer hall with a picture of Lord Rama and also Mahatma Gandhi. Thus on an auspicious day the ashram became Gandhi Ashram and a finger post displaying the name and direction was hung on a tree on the Highway to draw the attention of the passersby and also the travellers. After doing all this she wrote to the rehabilitation cell of the Municipality informing that she had survived. In that letter she had also given her address. To her pleasant surprise from the first day of the ensuing month till now she was regularly getting a monthly grant of Rs.500/-

"To be frank with you," she disclosed, "I never visited the town after the flash floods had thrown me over here. Yes, why should I when I have none to talk to or no place to rest for a while?" She looked very sad when she concluded the narration. With a rapt attention both the Mayor and Mayoress heard each and every letter of the tragic tale of hers. "I am happy that you people have visited the place on seeing the finger-post." She appreciated.

The Mayor wanted to ask a good number of questions but soon felt that he could pay an exclusive visit for gathering more information about Mahatma Gandhi. He was happy that he could get to know everything about the background of Gandhi Maidan and also about the statue. Now the truth was before him. If at all

the Maidan needed a change in name, legitimately it should be named after this family and not the Senior's. Not at all! Then the statue of that great saint should be reinstalled there itself and not be exhibited in any museum even if it were of great artistic value.

The saint Mahatma Gandhi was not an imaginary figure but was living and that he did visit the town. He was capable of drawing huge crowds of people and had propagated that Lord Rama's name was a great source of strength under all circumstances especially in the hour of crisis. But was Mahatma Gandhi's son more powerful than the father himself? If that was the case, where was he now and what were his achievements? He wanted to know. Joining his palms he respectfully said, "Mother, when we started from the village little did we imagine that we would pay a visit to this holy ashram. It must be the destiny that has brought us over here particularly when I am trying hard to get to know the history of Gandhi Maidan as the Municipality has thought of constructing a new building there." He vividly narrated all that had happened thereafter including the move to change the name.

The Mother heard everything very patiently. After he had finished his narration, she deeply sighed. Then believing firmly that the Mayor knew fully well about Mahatma Gandhi, she remarked, "I have nothing to comment upon. Really! Unfortunately all this goes to prove that Gandhiji has become a forgotten hero. After a few years from now his name will remain only in the textbooks of the schools like Buddha and Ashoka of the bygone eras. The elders will totally forget him while the children will remember for some days during the examination period, only to answer questions if any, on him. I will not be unhappy if the name of the Maidan is going to be changed into Pinnu Shait Maidan. Politics in our country can do and undo anything at the whim and pleasure of the politicians. That is why there is a popular slogan, 'My India is Great!' she heartily laughed!

By then the car driver came to report: "Sir, the car is ready. Shall we?" The guests stood up and touched her feet as a mark of respect and reverence. Then they joined their palms to say, "Bye!" But before that the Mayor suddenly remembered something. At once he asked, "Mother, can you tell me the name of the Mahatma's son or the daughter? Because the Statue declares 'Father of...' and the names of his children are not visible. If I get to know the names I would

like complete the phrase by engraving them so that the future generations will know everything by going through the inscription.'

With a very broad grin, the Mother slowly answered, "In fact my husband knew everything about Mahatma Gandhi and his family and his family life. I did not have the opportunity to know other than Mahatma's most popular message of ..." she stopped for a while, called an inmate to her side and whispered something. He nodded his head and ran out and returned with a wooden carving depicting three small monkeys sitting in a row, the first one covering mouth, the second one covering ears and the third one its eyes with both the palms. Gifting to the Mayor she modestly said, "This is a humble gift from Gandhi Ashram to both of you. In fact it is a replica of Mahatma Gandhi's famous 'Three Monkeys' that convey the golden message, 'Speak No Evil, Hear No Evil and See No Evil. If one sincerely follows this immortal message day in and day out, life would definitely become worth living. Please carry this home and imbibe the spirit of Mahatma's message especially while serving the society and people."

The Mayor was really happy. He heartily acknowledged: "Mother, both of us are honoured by your kind words and this valuable gift. Indeed we are twice blessed. We shall visit again and spend more time. Thank you very much!"

"You are most welcome! May God bless you!" She raised her right hand as a mark of benedictory blessing while they bowed before her reverentially and took leave with a sense of great satisfaction.

22. A STRANGE BARTER

Little did the Mayor imagine that the State Government would take such a swift action in making arrangements for shifting the statue of the Mahatma. The team from the museum came fully prepared with the packing material, equipment and also a sturdy vehicle capable of transporting the statue with ease. Even though the Mayor had come to know more about the statue and its

background he adopted the line of least resistance leaving everything in the hands of Hanumanji, as by then he had come to a conclusion that there was no point in representing to the Chief Minister who had taken a decision hearing only one side of the story.

The team had arrived in the morning and by after-noon they finished the job. After food, the vehicle with a special crane lifted the precious cargo and placed securely on the vehicle. The team-leader came to the Mayor and sought permission to commence the return journey. The Mayor stood up and bade a solemn farewell: "Safe journey!" Somehow without his knowledge his eyes became wet. All these days as soon as arrived at the Municipality, before going to his chamber he would first go to the statue, pay respects to the saint and then only start the day's routine as somehow, the saint had secretly won over his heart. Now that the statue would leave forever he felt that he had lost all his moral and spiritual strength which could not be recouped at all at any point of time later in his life. To him, the world looked dark, dull and empty without a single ray of hope in sight!

That afternoon, unexpectedly the Backbencher called on the Mayor. For the first time he saw the Mayor in a depressed mood. He anxiously enquired, "Mayor sir, you don't look cheerful today. I hope nothing untoward has happened!" The Mayor looked up at him seriously. Then in a complaining tone said, "How could I be cheerful when the whole world is working against me and me only?"

"Mayor sir," trying to console him, the Backbencher said, "I hope I have not offended your feelings in any way."

"Why should I blame anyone," a crestfallen Mayor with a heavy heart said, "What harm did that saint, Mahatma Gandhi cause to these politicians? He must have been dead and gone to the heaven decades ago and I don't know why his lifeless statue should cause an eyesore to some of the people in this town. I was told that the saint was a great devotee of Lord Rama and so, this should not have happened to him in this very town where Hanumanji, another devotee of Lord Rama happens to be the Guardian Deity. This does not augur well for the future of this town. According to me no tragedy is greater than this!"

"I learn the statue has already gone," the Backbencher bitterly

remarked. "I never thought that the State Government would stoop so low to snatch a statue from us in the name of safety and security. They should have provided adequate security cover if it was lacking. After all the police department is under the control of the State Government and not the Municipality."

The Mayor sighed deeply for a while and then sadly stated, "We have already lost the statue of the Mahatma and now we have to see what is going to happen to the Maidan standing in his name!"

"Mayor sir," the Backbencher enthusiastically declared, "there is absolutely no need to worry about Gandhi Maidan. I have happily solved the problem once for all. In fact I never imagined that it could be resolved so easily to everybody's satisfaction. Just now I am returning from the Gandhi Maidan itself having removed the sign-board I had put up there. I have arrived at an understanding with the Senior!"

The Mayor was first puzzled and then perplexed: "Did you say you have pulled down the board? Then why did you put up if at all it was to be removed one day?"

"Mayor sir," the Backbencher disclosed with a broad grin winking his eyes mischievously, "to be frank with you without any forethought I had put up the board as a scarecrow and to tell you honestly I had never dreamt that the Senior and his men would be scared to the extent of rushing to you to seek your help, consult legal experts, offer prayers in the temple, seek guidance of astrologers and when all these did not yield the desired results, to touch my feet seeking my favour!"

"Then did they really touch your feet?" The Mayor asked, unbelieving.

"Not literally," the Backbencher heartily laughed: "Slightly lesser than that. It is one of the methods normally used by every politician who wants to get the things done. What a politeness, what a respect and what a sweetness and softness in every word spoken! Invoking the benedictions of Hanumanji, the Senior appealed to me that I should withdraw from the scene by pulling down the board and that he would be willing to pay any amount of compensation for the sacrifice I am going to make!"

"That means they offered you a bribe," the Mayor interrupted

Impatiently. "Not in the strict sense!" the Backbencher calmly continued, "Something more respectable than that. They called it compensation but I treated as a bounty. It is something like the 'donations' collected by some of our unscrupulous political parties for any services rendered directly or indirectly including seat adjustments. Whatever be the name, it involved some payment of money. I reflected over the offer for a while. Then to scare them away, I demanded an exorbitant sum of a lakh of rupees that too with a string!"

"One lakh of rupees?" the Mayor's mouth fell open out of surprise and in the next instant bitterly feeling that the whole deal was a dirty one, impatiently he asked, "Tell me quickly what's that string!"

"Simple," the Backbencher laughed again, "the Maidan will have a hybrid name. It will contain his father's name and also of that unknown son's father, Mahatma Gandhi's name."

"Hybrid name—What is that something you have newly introduced?" The Mayor enquired in a harsh tone. "Mayor sir, it is very simple. The Gandhi Maidan will be renamed as 'Pinnu Shait Gandhi Maidan. Pinnu Shait Gandhi Maidan!' The new name will be consisting of the names of two fathers' instead of only one father as at present."

The Mayor became furious. "That means the Maidan will have an uncommon name of P.S.Gandhi Maidan now and after sometime, P.S.G. Maidan and you have agreed to this for a bribe of one lakh of rupees. I never thought that you will barter your integrity and uprightness for money, that too with the Senior, that mean fellow."

"Excuse me, Mayor sir," the Backbencher with all seriousness revealed: "The Bank Manager wanted me to take the lead to construct a community centre to provide basic amenities to the residents of Sarayu Village. I only hit the opportunity to extract some money from the Senior for the benefit of the poor and the needy and not for personal benefit at all. I swear by Hanumanji!" Concluding like this he bowed down his head as if he was ashamed of bartering one cause for another.

Silent moments ticked by. The Mayor viewed the whole episode dispassionately. When the Mother of Gandhi Ashram herself had expressed that she would not mind changing the name of the Maidan,

why should he bother about it, that too when the poor villagers were going to be benefitted? He thought of allowing the things to take their own shape.

The Backbencher however felt that he had lost the whole battle for nothing, that too, when the Mayor whom he had held in high esteem did not approve of his action. Like a child he innocently asked, "Mayor sir, tell me frankly, have I done anything wrong?" The Mayor looked up silently at his face. It was looking as innocent as ever. There was not a single speck of dishonesty or cunningness visible there. Therefore he felt that there was no need to drag on the matter further on the grounds of ethics when the society itself had become bankrupt in this behalf. He remained quiet pondering over the whole episode.

Poor Backbencher! He became nervous when he saw the Mayor thoughtful bowing his head down. But after a few moments, when the Mayor raised his head and smiled brightly, he felt relieved. All the while his face was looking exactly like the sun hidden behind a dark cloud and now that the Mayor had smiled the Backbencher felt that the sun had started shining again with brightness after passing over the cloud.

To console him the Mayor sincerely said, "Under the circumstances narrated by you, even I would not have fared better!"

Greatly relieved, the Backbencher now felt encouraged to report that the Senior and his bosom friend the Principal, had left for the State Capital to invite the Chief Minister for the renaming ceremony and also for a visit to Hanumanji Temple for offering a special pooja to the deity. All this the Senior was doing with an eye on the forthcoming Assembly Elections. It appeared he wanted to contest with the blessings of the ruling party headed by the CM. The Mayor heaved a sigh with a very heavy heart. "In the United States they say, the world stands on the Dollar and in India I must declare that the Nation stands on the solid support of our Rupee. Anyway before concluding this discussion, let me ask you where is the signboard of Gandhi Maidan, which you have sold for one lakh of rupees?"

"Mayor sir," the Backbencher politely pointed out, "please do not make fun of me any longer. I am such a person that even if the whole world were going to perish, I would not have changed my

and. But where is the support? To what extent a single person can resist? From the beginning you had asked me to shun violence. Throughout you were advising me to have patience, wait and watch. I have literally followed whatever you had desired and told. When I felt that the things were going out of our control, as a business man I thought of making profit that too, not for my sake but for somebody else who badly needed help and support. I hope you will definitely appreciate the spirit."

"Good!" the Mayor said as lightly as he could, not wishing to hurt the feelings of the Backbencher any more. "I never asked for any details. All that I wanted to know was, what happened to your 'carecrow' that board born out of your master-mind and donated by you to the Municipality."

Bowing his head still down, the Backbencher slowly stated that he was given to the Senior in exchange of one lakh of rupees. Without uttering a word, the Mayor smiled for a while. However when the smile disappeared from his face, the Backbencher suddenly lost courage and felt greatly ashamed. He wanted to tell something but his tongue could not form any words and so, with great difficulty, with his trembling hands, he drew out from his pocket a fixed deposit receipt. Displaying it, he said, "I have already deposited the money in the Bank."

However, shame and disgrace still lingering in his mind, he cleared his throat to declare, "I swear by Hanumanji. I have not pocketed even a single paisa out of it!" With great difficulty he told all this, as by then he had realised that he should not have given up the efforts of retaining the name in exchange of money which was nothing short of a bribe whatever be its nomenclature or the purpose for which it was going to be spent as it was not a donation given without attaching any condition or stipulation or without expecting anything in return. He should have fought till the end like one-man army whether there was any support or not, or whether he was going to win or lose.

After three days, the Senior with the Principal called on the Mayor acting as if nothing had taken place. He had brought a packet of sweets and also a letter addressed by the Chief Minister to the Mayor. The letter gave the full details of the forthcoming visit of the CM

with the day, date and time of arrival and also departure from the town. The programme indicated a visit to Hanumanji Temple, tea with the councillors at the Council Hall and thereafter naming ceremony at the Maidan. The letter read that as far as possible there should not any formal addresses by the Chief Minister and all the programmes should be as simple as possible. Interestingly enough though he had not met the Mayor so far he had asked him to act as the co-ordinator of the entire programme so that there would not be any confusion.

Majestically handing over the packet of sweets the Senior sought the co-operation and offered to defray all the expenses from the moment of arrival till the moment of departure including tea and refreshments to be served in the Municipality. He volunteered to bring the garlands also and stated that the Mayor need not worry about anything except making the CM's visit a grand success. Inwardly laughing at the sudden transformation in the Senior, the Mayor, all the while was wearing a serious look while listening to his words. As soon as the Senior concluded his narration the Mayor with an air of dignity stood up and declared, "Gentlemen, don't you worry! When the Guardian Deity Hanumanji Himself is with you and with all of us also, CM's visit should be a grand success and I don't have any doubts about it!"

23. THE MIST IS CLEARED

The stage was set for the forthcoming visit of the Chief Minister to the town. The Senior with the Principal had taken all pains to accord him a royal welcome and so they got Hanuman Temple decorated with flowers, festoons, buntings and illumination of tiny electric bulbs of different colour and hues. Similarly the Municipal Building and the surroundings were also kept neat and clean. At the entrance of the town a huge colourfully decorated makeshift gateway was erected with a cloth banner according a hearty welcome to the CM of the state.

The CM was scheduled to arrive at nine o'clock in the morning and a garland in hand the Mayor with all the councillors was present at the entry point. There was a sizable crowd to greet the CM.

Sharp at nine, a caravan of cars came and in the middle was the CM's —a cream coloured car—with a small tri-colour fluttering on the bonnet and a revolving red light on the top constantly flickering. The CM's car stopped just in front of the gateway and quickly the door was opened. Joining his palms to say, 'Namaste' the CM emerged smiling very brightly. The Mayor walking a step forward, greeted and said, "Hearty Welcome to our Town, sir," and then dismounted. He was soon followed by the Senior and all others one by one. After the councillors, as the protocol demanded, the Principal offered a bouquet of flowers and whispered, "Welcome and thank you for making it convenient to visit our Town!" The CM held his hand tightly, winked and then in a very friendly tone said, "How can I afford to disappoint my friends over here?" At once the Mayor felt that the visit must have been the handiwork of the Principal probably out of some previous connection or acquaintance.

The formal welcome over, the CM got into the car and the caravan then proceeded to Hanuman Temple followed local cars and also that of the Mayor's. When the CM arrived at the temple square, crackers were burst and there was a grand display of fireworks. As soon as it was over, a formal welcome by way of beating of drums and cymbals and playing of pipes and trumpets commenced. When it was in progress, from a corner came majestically the beautifully caparisoned temple elephant led by the mahout clad in a ceremonial dress. It was holding a garland of red roses in its trunk. The CM, Mayor, Senior, Principal and the Backbencher were all standing in a line the CM being in the centre. It was prearranged that the elephant would garland the CM under the guidance of the mahout but both to the mahout and the elephant everyone was a stranger except the Backbencher who happened to be the trustee of the temple for a long time. Therefore, the elephant mechanically walked straight to the Backbencher and as it was slowly raising the trunk to garland him, the Backbencher with a good presence of mind understood what the elephant was about to do! Instantly he took charge of the situation and touched affectionately the trunk of the elephant, which he knew very well and led to the CM and patted the trunk signalling to garland the CM. The elephant instantly garlanded the CM and then as a mark of respect, again raised its trunk and saluted. The CM was happy and so was the crowd. All the onlookers now clapped

their hands in appreciation.

The Senior, being the managing trustee of the Temple led the CM and his entourage into the temple. The idol of Hanumanji was beautifully adorned with flowers and garlands and the sanctum sanctorum was decorated with mango twigs and flowers. Priests were repeatedly chanting the benedictory hymns and the bells kept on ringing to the accompaniment of cymbals, gongs and conch shell.

The CM and others stood in front of Hanumanji clasping their hands to offer silent prayers. The priest after obtaining the permission of the Senior who happened to be the managing trustee waved camphor to the deity now chanting hymns in praise of the deity. Then he took a wreath of flowers from the idol and as a blessing garlanded the CM. Thereafter he made a mark of kumkum on his forehead to ward off all evils. Then in conclusion, showered sanctified rice, as a blessing again. Pleased with all this, the CM felt that the visit to the Temple was good. He dropped as an offering a five hundred-rupee note in the plate kept in front of the idol. Then clasping his hands he bowed his head again in front of the deity and thereafter raising his head, asked the Senior, "Shall we?"

Now the caravan crawled to the Municipality. As soon as the CM got down from the car, the Mayor wished, "Hearty Welcome to the Municipality, sir!" The CM smiling gaily shook hands with the Mayor for quite some time and thereafter enquired, "Where is the Council Hall? We shall go directly there!" Agreeing, the Mayor led him to the Hall and all others followed them.

At the entrance the CM stopped for a while as the placard announcing the Reward of Rs.5000/- to anyone who could complete the caption, "Father of—" supplying the proof in support, caught his attention and as he was unable to understand what it was or its relevance to the Council he decided to ask the Mayor after occupying the seat. They went in where seats were neatly arranged around a big oval shaped table. There were two high seats kept for the CM and the Mayor. As soon as the CM took his seat, the Mayor sat down and keeping a little distance on one side sat the Senior and on the other side the Backbencher. It was an exclusive programme of tea in honour of the CM with the Councillors and so there was no entry to the outsiders including the Principal. As was decided earlier, there were no speeches or addresses and so, after giving a bouquet

f flowers to the CM as a mark of respect and cordial welcome, the Mayor gave instructions to serve the tea and snacks.

As the snacks were being served, the CM in a whisper asked the Mayor, " I would like to have a word with you privately. Show me your chamber." The Mayor stood up. And the CM announced: Friends, we shall come back within a minute. Meantime, please take the tea. Do not wait for us. No formalities please!"

The CM occupied the Mayor's chair and the Mayor sat on the visitor's. The CM enquired what was the background of the announcement of the reward of Rs.5000/- The Mayor enthusiastically gave the full account of all that had happened since the 'Bhoomi Poojan' day till his visit to Gandhi Ashram near Sarayu Village. He finally concluded that though the statue had gone the mystery remained although hundreds of people from the town and the nearby places had visited and seen the saint.

After hearing the tale attentively the CM's face suddenly became red and eyes shone out of excitement. He looked terribly upset and the calmness on his face seemed to have suddenly vanished. Still controlling all his emotions and excitement, unbelieving he asked almost in a whisper, " Did you not seek opinion and guidance of the Principal of the local college who professes to be a great historian?"

"Yes, I did, sir! But he opined that the statue of the Mahatma Gandhi is a handiwork of a sculptor, shaped out of his imagination. He categorically declared that there was no saint by that name in the Early Ages or in the Middle Ages in the History of India." The CM was stunned: "Were you not able to get anyone in this town who could recognize the statue or complete the caption, 'Father of

' "

"Sorry, sir," the Mayor was highly apologetic: " I could not find any one. So far as I am concerned, you may be aware that I am a Non-Resident Indian born and brought up and educated in the United States. My father had migrated to the US when he was very young and I came down here to serve my country and my people. I am slowly and slowly learning what India is and what her people are. It is an interesting experience and amazing too!" He was very sincere.

Then as if he had remembered something he suddenly asked, "Sir, nobody here knows who is this Mahatma Gandhi and what is his son's or daughter's name!" The CM who was all the while excited, suddenly burst into laughter. "My dear friend, what makes you ask this question?" Innocence still writ large on his face, the Mayor said, "Just to find out whether the Mahatma has any descendants. To put it in other words, it is just to complete the caption, "Father of—" so that I will have a personal satisfaction that I have sincerely tried to ascertain it!"

His words deeply moved the CM. Although he did not express he was highly sympathetic with the Mayor. Then, not willing to waste time he said affectionately, "Well, I know the answer to your question which none in the town has tried to give. But let me reveal it in the presence of everyone and claim your Reward of Rs.5,000/-" Declaring so, he shook the hands of the Mayor and said, "We shall now go to the Council Hall and conclude the visit."

As soon they had entered, all the Councillors stood up as a mark of respect and the CM requested them to be seated. They had already consumed snacks and tea and only two plates of snacks and tea was waiting for the CM and the Mayor as their share. "Shall we get some hot tea, sir?" the Senior asked. "Doesn't matter!" the CM said, "Whatever is here let me drink. We are running short of time!" He gulped down the tea thinking seriously the ways and means to make his visit a memorable one without hurting anybody's feelings. The Mayor was keenly watching his face all the while, as the CM did not reveal his mind at all. The Mayor mechanically drank the tea and asked an attendant to clear the plates and the cups.

After a few silent moments the CM stood up, cleared his throat and declared, "Friends, you may be wondering why I had gone to Mayor's chamber with him. After beholding the announcement of the Reward of Rs.5000/- on the door here, I thought of participating in the competition. Now all of you must congratulate me because I have won Rs.5000/- announced by you people for completing the caption of 'Father of—' I would like to know when should I come to collect the reward." He paused for while.

"If that is the case, we must give the reward today itself!" The senior pleaded thinking that his words would please the CM. "I second it!" Not wishing to lag behind the Backbencher emphatically declared. Now somebody stood up and before he could speak out, the CM said, "No 'I third it,' please!"

"Kindly bear in mind that this is not your council meeting. The very CM of the state is addressing you. I will give all of you the time and opportunity to speak but that is after I finish my address. Now I want to convey something serious and important. Kindly listen attentively.

"First of all let me tell you that you have a very good Mayor capable of understanding people and also capable of undertaking any task. In token of my appreciation I have decided to invite him with his wife as my guest to the State Capital for a day. At that time he should bring a complete list of all the requirements and the needs of this township and I would like to attend to them on war footing. I shall sanction everything even if it were amounting to my going out of the way.

"I am happy that the Senior has become the Managing Trustee of Shri Hanumanji Temple. I am grateful to him for according me a grand welcome. Now he has gone into the fold of Bajrangbali who is capable of turning soil into gold, and so when that is the position he may not need the help and support of ordinary mortals like me. Yet, I will include the temple as a Tourist Spot so that adequate grant can flow from the state treasury for the repairs and maintenance of this centuries old temple and its precincts and also the welfare of the people in the surroundings. Yes, there is a request from him to honour the memory of his father by naming a suitable place in and around the township. I request the Mayor to study the proposal and make suitable recommendations acceptable both to the authorities and him.

"Last but not the least, I must appreciate the Backbencher. I learn he has borrowed a sum of one lakh rupees from somebody to erect a community centre in Sarayu Village. I appeal to him to repay that debt. The state government is capable of spending that amount and in appreciation of his spirit of service to the village, the centre will be named after him.

"Now after appreciating you all, let me have the freedom of commenting on something. A few days ago, as you know, while digging the Municipal grounds the statue of the Mahatma was found and some people from this town met me in a delegation and I am sorry to say, represented that it was an antique of immense value and that there were no proper security arrangements available here from the safety point of view. Therefore I gave orders for shifting to the State Capital. Out of curiosity I remained present when it was unpacked and to our utter shock, surprise and dismay the statue happened to be that of Mahatma Gandhi which was written on the pedestal very clearly and when everybody knew that he is the Father of our Nation, we did not know why it was bundled up as an antique, as Gandhiji lived not centuries ago. That being the case, where is the need to complete the caption?

"We have currency notes carrying his picture and we handle the notes everyday. Barely a month ago, on 2nd October we had a holiday which is an annual feature in commemoration of the Birth Day of the Father of our Nation. Have we really forgotten him or do we have no time even to think of him for a minute or two when a full day's holiday is given to us? I can understand the difficulties of your Mayor in knowing the things, as he was born and brought up and was in the United States till recently. What about other councillors who are the residents in this country since their birth? I fail to understand the backdrop of all this. Why everyone in the council became a silent and passive onlooker? City Fathers cannot close their eyes and ears like this and watch the fun like dolls especially on an important issue concerning the very 'Father of the Nation.' The elected representatives have a duty and responsibility towards the society and let us remember this always."

There was a pin drop silence and everyone bowed his head feeling guilty. Then, the CM picked up the bouquet of flowers lying in front of him and passed on to the Mayor and complimented, "I am glad you have handled everything very patiently. Here you are. Take these flowers as my appreciation to you!"

With that everyone felt that the tide had rolled back and the mist was finally cleared fully. Now it was clear to the Mayor that

he name of Gandhi Maidan could never be changed or renamed. Then should there be the renaming ceremony at the Maidan, he doubted. In a very low tone he enquired, "Sir, shall we proceed now to Gandhi Maidan to attend to the next programme?"

"Definitely yes. The programme stands as you may have invited people who might have already turned up. I do not wish to disappoint any one on any count!" He heartily smiled fully satisfied over the programme so far.

When they reached Gandhi Maidan, the CM was overwhelmed as huge crowds were waiting for his arrival. He had thought that it would be a small crowd for unveiling a plaque containing the new name of the Maidan but here to his amazement it did not look like a simple programme. Even the Mayor never thought that the citizens would turn up in such a large number to have a look of the CM who rarely visited that place.

On the beautifully decorated dais, in the front row sat the CM, the Mayor, the Senior, the Backbencher, the Principal and also the Chief Officer, while the other councillors occupied their seats in the rear row. The Mayor signalled and at once the students from the Municipal School appeared on the dais and melodiously sang the prayer song. After they had finished, the Mayor welcomed the CM with a very heavy garland of red roses and then requested him to speak a few words eagerly waiting what the CM was going to do when the official renaming ceremony was out of context now.

The CM stood up and looked at the crowd that had gathered only to see him in person. He was really moved by the presence of hundreds of people who had arrived there to attend the meeting voluntarily. He joined his palms and declared that he had no words to express his gratitude for according him a hearty welcome both at Hanumanji Temple and also at the Municipality.

"Though it is stated to be a visit to the Town," he said, "from my point of view it is a holy pilgrimage firstly because of the centuries old Hanumanji Temple standing here and secondly because this was the very place from where I am speaking now, Mahatma Gandhi, Father of our Nation had addressed huge crowds during the freedom struggle and this was the very same place where he had stayed for

a night before proceeding to his next camp. On account of that, this Maidan came to be known as Gandhi Maidan so as to preserve for posterity the memory of his visit over here. Therefore this place is going to continue with the same name forever. I mean Gandhi Maidan will remain as Gandhi Maidan only, for all time to come.

"I learn that a few decades ago, there was an ashram here known as Gandhi Ashram, functioning very effectively to propagate the teachings of the Mahatma. The Guruji here had installed a life-size bronze statue of the Mahatma in front of the Ashram. During one of the rainy seasons, unfortunately there were flash floods in the River Sarayu and this entire township except Hanumanji's temple got submerged for a few days causing a lot of damage to the life and property. At that time, this Ashram was completely washed away without leaving any trace and the statue got buried, which you people, have found recently. I learn that from among the people of the Ashram, only one person survived and that was the Mother of the Ashram. I am happy to announce that she is still living. Not only living but is running in her own humble way, an Ashram, a few kilometers away from here, in the same name of Gandhi Ashram. I am happy that your Municipality is regularly sending her a monthly grant of Rs.500/- Now I request the City Fathers to call on her and make an appeal to re-establish Gandhi Ashram to propagate the life and teachings of the Mahatma as it used to be here a few decades ago. The State Government will make full investment in this behalf. I feel there is no service greater than this to our beloved Father of the Nation. I thank you all for having given me an opportunity to come down and address you, the good citizens of a good town.

Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai! Bharatmata ki Jai!"

The crowd responded with loud cheers and a prolonged applause.

As soon as the formal programme ended with the singing of the National Anthem, the CM took time to call privately the Principal. Displaying his displeasure he stated, "I never thought that you would do so much of injustice to the very Father of the Nation branding his statue as an antique. Professor, from the seventeenth century, bring your knowledge of history up to date. Please do not try to venture this type of dirty politics even in a dream!" "I am sorry sir,"

The Principal begged for forgiveness.

Mission over, the CM took leave wishing the Mayor a very successful tenure. With the bouquet of flowers gifted by the CM the Mayor returned home with a very light heart. Passing it on to his wife, in a relaxed mood he conveyed every bit of all that had happened during the CM's visit. Claspig his hands, he concluded his report remembering Hanumanji.

Listening everything with a rapt attention, the Mayoress slowly disclosed: "Hanumanji has answered my prayers also. You are going to be a father!"

"Me, father?" he refused to believe: "Let there be only one father, the Father of the Nation. I do not wish to be a second Father of the Nation. Looking at the way in which the people treat him, nobody should think of becoming the Father of the Nation any more."

"Dear, dear," the Mayoress entreated, "Don't get yourself confused. I do not wish that you should become a second Father of the Nation. Even I do not desire that. Give a crown and then publicly crucify, what a shame! It is enough if you become a father of your child within the bounds of our family. It is three months now!" With blushes her face became red. However, she managed to pull his hand and made him touch her stomach. "Really?" he enquired. With that magical touch, for a moment, the Mayor forgot the whole world full of politics that emanated from the Senior, the Backbencher, the Principal, all the other spineless Councillors (whom he thought so after the CM's visit), Gandhi Maidan, Municipality, Fish Market, Dilkhush Restaurant and also the so called Welfare Officer. Fondly he hugged his wife for a long time till she slowly released herself from the embrace. Stroking his hair lovingly for a while she exclaimed, "Dear, I am proud of you. Really you are great both at home and outside. Please keep up!"

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[from cover Page 2]

And I am forced to smile approvingly
At the gambler and the robber
Thief and the thug
The dishonest and corrupt official
And even at the narrow-minded
Selfish politician
Who shamelessly tells the lie
That he serves the country
And poor people!
Tell me, why should I keep on smiling
At the dreadful terrorists and militants
Who ruthlessly kill my innocent people?
Tell me, honestly why should I smile
At everything-
Whether it is right
Or it is wrong.”
“Bapu,” I tried to console,
“Can you not see on the same currency note
‘Satyameva Jayate’ to state,
Ultimately
‘Truth Alone Triumphs!’
“I have seen it, I have seen it
Although it is almost invisible!
Why can’t you print
Big and Bold
That all can read with ease.
Are we afraid of speaking the Truth
Or Truth is vanishing
From our home and hearth?”
Unable to answer I bowed my head
Pondering over his words,
After some time I raised my head
But Bapu was no longer there.

(Reprinted from the Author’s collection of poems,
“India Sixty” published in 2007, the 60th year
of Independence of India)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KINNIGOLI GANESH MALLYA (B.1939) popularly known as K.G.Mallya is the Retired Dy.General Manager of Syndicate Bank. He is M.Com. CAIIB & AIB (London). For sometime he was also one of the Chief Examiners of CAIIB PART II Exam of Indian Institute of Bankers. He is a free-lance journalist and an author in Konkani, Kannada and English with more than 62 published titles to his credit in all the three languages. The subjects he touches upon are varied, from banking and finance to philosophy.

His Kannada Novel "Vyasa" (the author of Mahabharata) and English Novel, "The Statue of the Mahatma" are regarded as the standard works in the contemporary literature. "The Statue..." translated in Kannada by Shri L.Narasimhiah Retired Head Master of Tumkur, had won the Best Book Award on the Mahatma by the Karnataka State Gandhi Memorial Committee for the year 2000 AD. His book on Dhirubhai Ambani, "One and Only Dhirubhai" was very popular but another biography, "T.A.Pai and Dombivli Local" was selected as one of the "books of everlasting value" by Panchkadayi Konkani Monthly of Manipal, Karnataka.

Recognising his services in different fields, when Shri Venkatramana Temple, Mulki started Daily "Anna Santarpana Seva" on 4th Feb 2004 with Shri S.G.Kamath as the Chief Guest Shri Mallya was also invited to preside over this historic programme. By a sheer coincidence on the previous day the 3rd Feb 2004 Shri Mallya presided over the prestigious Kannada Sahitya Sammelan of Mangalore Taluka held at Punaroor Temple, near Mulki.

Besides these he was honoured by Karnataka Tulu Sahitya Academy in Mumbai in the year 2003 and Karnataka Konkani Sahitya Academy in Suratkal in 2007 in recognition of his lifetime contribution to literature. At his native place Kinnigoli he was honoured by Shri Rama Mandir. And Yugapurusha Monthly Magazine Kinnigoli, conferred on him the "KA Udupa Prashasthi" for his significant contribution to Kannada Literature.

He was also honoured at Vishwa Saraswat Sammelan Mangalore in Dec 1999 and Dombivli Saraswat Sammelan in Nov 2003 for his meritorious service to the literary world. His "Story of Tsunami" has won a gold medal from the President of AISCO Mumbai in the year 2005.

In the year 1972 under an Award from Rotary International for international understanding he visited U.S.& Canada for two months.

This book is published to mark his 70th Birthday on 9th July 2009.

- The Publishers